

FASHION IN LITERATURE

A STUDY OF CHANGING TASTE

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I

ON TASTE IN GENERAL

THIS book will be restricted to the study of literary taste, and will probably be finished long before even that bounded theme has been half exhausted. Nevertheless, it may be desirable to halt on the threshold in order to consider for a moment the general conception of which literary taste is but one manifestation. Even the most obvious ideas may put on a certain clearness, if defined, in the good old fashion, by genus and differentia : and literary taste is far from an obvious idea. It belongs, pretty plainly, to the same wide class as musical taste, artistic taste, the taste for natural beauty, and æsthetic sensibility generally : but it is by no means easy to mark the lines which separate it from these related feelings. Its rules, if it had any, are not theirs : witness the appalling opinions often passed on Milton by good judges of Beethoven : yet these two great men must be similar, and it is certain that Milton himself would have appreciated Beethoven, and would have found in him a kindred spirit. The rules of painting, again, are *like* those of poetry, but, as Lessing showed once for all, they are not the same. Painting gains by being directly presented to the eye, which, if Horace is

right, has a great advantage over the ear as a means of stirring the imagination ; and its rules are aimed at making the most of that advantage. But poetry can describe continuous action, and may thus make up for its deficiencies in other respects. The laws of each art tell the art, first, how to make full use of its best points, and secondly, how it may ' turn its necessity to glorious gain ' : and neither its strong points nor its necessities are the same as those of any other art. It is only with some caution, then, that the study of art in general can be applied to the use of one art in particular. None the less, as these arts *have* after all much in common, and as the tastes to which they appeal have much in common also, we can hardly speak of one without at least attending to another. Assuredly no man can be a good judge of any art unless he has some, however slight, acquaintance with another to which he may compare it. It may pay us, then, if we trace all these similar but different tastes to their common original : for we cannot appreciate difference till we form some conception of likeness. And, as so often, we find the original a commonplace, almost vulgar conception. All these varied sensibilities are called tastes because they resemble, in a marked and unmistakable manner, the simple physical sensation which is one of the very first the human being is capable of. The word, starting with this humble connotation, has gradually enlarged itself until it embraces some of the very highest powers of the human mind. But, airy and delicate as it often is, it still retains marks of the hole of the pit whence it was dug. As we can recognise in the most intellectual of men the clear traces of their descent from arboreal ancestors—as, for example, our upright gait,

though a second nature, still plainly shows that it is not our first—so the most exquisite and refined literary or artistic taste shows by its very name that it has ‘poor relations’; and, as comparative anatomy is useful to us in studying our own frame, so some light may be thrown upon the most refined of literary experiences by a consideration, however hasty, of the parental germ from which these other phrases are derived.

The word *taste*, the philologists tell us, comes ultimately from *tangere* to touch—it is a frequentative or intensive form of that verb. In this sense, of course, the tangent tastes the circle. But if we imagine the circle, as Canning¹ imagined the triangle, to put on human feelings, if we picture ‘circles joining in osculation sweet,’ we get an image of what happened later to the word. We came to limit tasting to touching with the tongue or palate, and forgot entirely that it once was used of contact with the tips of the fingers. The gain of this division of labour was, however, great. The word did not lose the sense of resistance, roughness, or smoothness, associated with touch: but it acquired in addition the connotations of sweetness, sourness, and all the other sensations we associate with the tongue or palate: so much so that, as we shall see later, we can talk of tactile tastes without noticing the pleonasm. This is aided, I think, by the fact that some tastes, especially those of the palate, are passive or reflex, whereas in others, though we cannot call them fully active, we are more or less conscious that we are using the tip of the tongue, and that the

¹ Or somebody else. The *Antijacobin* is of composite authorship; and the *Loves of the Triangles* is said to be the joint work of Canning, Ellis, and Hookham Frere.

mind is taking some part in the process. This is certainly the case with those extraordinary people called 'tea-tasters': they are assuredly mental workers. In that case, however, in my opinion the word has gone beyond its proper use; these gentlemen, as I shall indicate in a moment, ought to be called tea-critics or tea-discriminators. But the intervening stages, in which taste is half-way on to criticism, may be well exemplified by Chaucer's description of the Friar:

'Somewhat he lipped, for his wantownesse,
To make his English swete upon his tonge';

where we see almost the exact point of transition between the physical and the mental applications of the term taste. We see the Friar experiencing a physical sensation, but we also catch him taking mental note of it; we can all but see the persuasive and eloquent Franciscan *touching* the sounds with his tongue, and feeling their sweetness. Having satisfied himself that they *are* dainty and attractive, he sets out on his circuits in order by means of his *sweet* English, to charm a 'pitaunce' out of the widows he meets.

This transition is further assisted, I doubt not, by the common confusion, of which Shakespeare himself is guilty, between tasting and testing. The two words have, originally, nothing in common; but, as with *aby* and *abide*, or *mean* and *demean*, the likeness has led to the annexation of the realm of each by the other. When Sir Toby says to Viola, 'Taste your legs, sir, put them in motion,' there can be no doubt that the two words could be used interchangeably. And so also when *we*, who ought to know better, speak of those 'tea-tasters,' we are really hesitating between the taste and the test—a hesitation which would be

dangerous in the case of arsenic or aconite. *Test*, I may say in passing, is from *testa*, a pot,¹ and, like *terra*, the earth, is ultimately derived from a word meaning *dry*. But this quite accidental likeness in the words is a type of what happens with the ideas. Taste passes very rapidly into discrimination: so rapidly indeed that we cannot decide the instant at which it does so. And, as we shall see, literary taste does the same thing. It is not by any means easy to tell when our mere *sense* of the beauty of a poem passes into criticism of it. We shall find, if we look carefully into Reynolds's *Discourses*, that he constantly leaps from one to the other, as if he knew no difference between the two; and, what is more surprising, Newman, in his essay on Aristotle's *Poetics*, is equally loose, and in one place actually identifies taste with good sense. Nevertheless, I think it exceedingly desirable to keep the two, as far as possible, apart in our minds, as we keep youth apart from maturity, or maturity from age, though we can never draw a clear line between them. Things are well worth distinguishing in thought, though in the outer world they may overlap.

I might draw here a comparison between taste and experimental science. Most of us remember how Bacon traces the various stages of experiment from *mera palpatio*—just a touch—through *inductio per enumerationem simplicem*, to the practical certainty which arises when the instances are numerous and the comparisons and distinctions precise. But there is no clear line marking off these stages from each other: even at the end of the series the certainty is never more than extreme probability, and at the beginning the slight chance is a probability after all. So with taste:

¹ So that *test-tube* is a pleonasm.

it begins with a *mera palpatio*, passes on into comparing, distinguishing, and testing, and terminates in something beyond itself, which is usually called criticism. But there is no marked division between these stages. They shade off gradually into each other, and in the highest criticism there is often to be traced something of the 'just-touching' of its poor and despised ancestor.

Thus, like all expressions for mental modes and processes, the word taste involves a metaphor drawn from a bodily sensation. We *see* a geometrical proof: this is a figure from sight; and to *see* is itself probably, in origin, merely to follow; it connotes a chase and finally a capture. We *grasp* an argument; here the figure is still more obvious. But we *taste* the beauty or simplicity of the demonstration: the image here is from yet another bodily sense. And it is worth noticing that this image is much more powerful and persistent than the others: the metaphor is surely not entirely dead. We feel it, subconsciously or otherwise, to be endlessly appropriate, as we do not with most of the established metaphors. We rarely desert it for another, as we do with seeing and grasping. Not only is the word still very much alive in its literal and primary sense, but even when transferred to the mental sphere it carries, I imagine, as often as not, a conscious apprehension of its material associations. All forms of physical taste have their analogues in literary or artistic appraisals; and, in judging works of high intellectual rank we have our dinners or lunches before us as a sort of standard of comparison. Mendelssohn, says the musical critic, is too 'sugary': the style of *Samson Agonistes* is 'austere,' that is, it makes the tongue dry: the humour of Swift leaves a bitter

taste in the mouth : Keats is sometimes too 'luscious' : we 'like' this, we 'savour' that : Browning is harsh or 'rough on the palate' : the *Rehearsal* 'has not wit enough to keep it sweet' : so and so 'nauseates.' 'Poetry,' said Coleridge, 'ought not always to have its highest relish.' Occasionally the metaphor is drawn out into a formal and recognised simile, as when Macaulay remarks that to read Seneca through is like dining exclusively on anchovy sauce and *pâté de foie gras* : or as when Bacon, in one of the most famous passages in literature, says that some books are to be chewed and digested, some swallowed, and some *tasted*—that is, merely *touched* with the tongue. All of us, in fact, acknowledge a close analogy between the feeling aroused by a work of art, whatever its kind, and the tasting of food.

My tentative account of taste, then, will be this—it is the mental power which enjoys or rejects an external work of art or nature, in a fashion analogous to that in which the palate enjoys or rejects the food that is presented to it. An art of taste is an art of enjoyment : and the training of taste, if such a thing should turn out to be possible, consists in teaching the mental palate to enjoy more keenly, and to discover more refined objects to enjoy. Mark that I call this definition tentative : there will be some points in which we may be inclined to alter it. But we are not likely to get rid of the metaphor of a 'mental palate.'

If then this 'taste,' however high it may soar, remains like Wordsworth's skylark, 'true to the kindred points of heaven and home,' it may be of use to consider briefly what the physiologists have to say about the humble original of this dainty, chastened, and educated mental capacity of ours. There are, we are told, three

kinds of physical taste. There are relishes and their opposites, disgusts : these are closely allied with the digestive apparatus, they are large and massive, not acute, they are somewhat rough, and tend to give way, as the palate is educated, to less coarse appreciations. A savage may be said to 'relish' his animal food, but hardly so clearly to discriminate his feelings as to arrive at taste proper ; and his 'disgust,' if it arises, may take very obvious and violent forms. He would rarely, one fancies, be able to tell us where the pleasure arising from the satisfaction of hunger ceases and the epicurean titillation of the palate begins. Children, again, as a rule, relish sweet things that would revolt their elders ; with time they come to prefer more neutral savours. We instinctively feel that it is unnatural for a child to like the foods that please its parents : and, on the other hand, few things are regarded as surer marks of vulgarity than the gust of a savage if exhibited by a civilised man.

Such 'relishes' find their parallel in the literary sphere. Violent effects, sharp contrasts, exaggerations, puns, paradoxes, excessive alliterations, these appeal to the uncultivated taste. The orator addressing a mob has to employ coarser methods than those which are adapted to an assembly of dons : and an essay of Addison's fails utterly when read to those who are accustomed to the captions and startling phrases of a daily newspaper. A figure of speech which earns the admiration of a child, to whom it is new, will not stir the languid pulse of a man who has seen a thousand examples of it, and observed it catalogued and analysed in half a dozen manuals of rhetoric. Münchhausen adventures, hairbreadth escapes, murders and Udolpho mysteries are 'relished' by the unsophisticated palate :

they cloy with years, and Jane Austen gains the suffrage once given unhesitatingly to the 'big bow-wow style.' St. John's parable, in the Apocalypse, of the book which was in his mouth sweet as honey, but which when swallowed produced bitterness and revolt, might be applied to the change of taste which thus so often shows itself as man passes from youth to maturity.

From 'relish' we turn to Taste proper. This specially distinguishes not the rich and the neutral but the sweet and the bitter: and it is possible to detect in it some approach to the intellectual. We can mark degrees in it; it is not 'massive' but 'acute'; and we can recall afterwards certain manifestations of it almost as readily and distinctly as sensations of smell. In Taste proper (it is a pity there is no simple name for it) the mind can almost construct a measuring-table, and compare one degree with another. Similarly with its opposite Distaste: here also we can mark degrees of repulsion, and recall with considerable accuracy distasteful feelings which this or that food has aroused in us. A sweet taste, though falling far short of an over-sugared relish, can give pleasure long after the actual sensation has passed away: and a bitter taste, in like manner, can give us a distinctly realised posthumous pain.

It is this Taste proper that provides the real analogue to artistic and literary taste—the analogue of which we are most often conscious, and to which we most often refer as a kind of standard. In artistic and literary taste, also, the pleasures and pains admit of being registered, recalled in memory, compared, and analysed; it, too, is 'acute,' balancing, and even discriminating; the emotions connected with it are regulated and controlled; and in it a mild intellectual element is clearly

to be discerned. For it will, I think, be conceded that there is no 'taste,' in this restricted sense, to be detected in the frenzied zest with which the Red Indian attacks his hard-earned and precarious meal, any more than in the greed with which the child devours its supper. I wish to avoid showing any idea of *reflection* to intrude into the idea conveyed by 'taste'; but I imagine—though I am far from wishing my opinion to be accepted without consideration—that in taste in this proper sense the element of *memory* is largely predominant. Such taste is something *added* to relish, or at least it is a relish with something added. And that element the memory provides, thus allowing the comparing powers to come into play. *So far*, but no farther, the intellect may be said to exert itself. True taste, in Wordsworthian language, is thus 'an emotion recollected in tranquillity.' However short the interval between the enjoyment and the recollection, *some* recollection there must be before taste proper can arise. You must not merely like your meal; you must be able to *say* you like it. It is here as with the two fools in Lear :

That Lord, which counselled thee
 To give away thy land,
 Come place him here by me,
 Do thou for him stand :
 The sweet and bitter fool
 Will presently appear,
 The one in motley here,
 The other found out there.

But you cannot place the sweet and the bitter in this opposition without the exertion of memory. And it is this exertion, almost imperceptible though it be, which marks off true taste from mere relish.

That the case is the same with literary and artistic taste will, I think, be generally admitted. You enjoy the Venus of Milo : the moment you begin to *realise* your enjoyment, but not before, you are exercising taste. And the word 'exercise' is part of the definition.

Finally, the physiologist draws attention to those tastes which, being closely allied with the sense of touch, may be called for convenience the Tactile. These all contain an element of pungency, and the pleasure they involve arises from a slight irritation. Such tastes are the saline, the alkaline, the sour, the astringent, the fiery, the acrid. It is doubtful whether any of these give immediate pleasure to the 'natural man.' As a rule, they are sought by the elderly, whose senses have been to some extent sophisticated, or by others as a variation on the relishes or saccharine tastes which have preceded them and require some contrast. Often they are 'acquired' tastes : they demand considerable use before the initial repulsion is first overcome and then transformed into liking. But the victory is sometimes singularly complete : there are many people who are almost incapable of receiving pleasure from any other kind of taste. The mental analogue to this it is hardly necessary to point out. Many will recall, for example, the repulsion they felt on first approaching the style of Sterne, Carlyle, Meredith, or any other 'astringent,' difficult, or eccentric author. Some of the older generation will perhaps recall their introduction to Browning, the taste for whom is certainly 'acquired.' Some Mentor, perhaps, told them the taste was worth the trouble of 'acquisition,' and they took the trouble. A few hours of annoyance, or even of exasperation, followed : but the trouble

did prove worth while. With some authors the inducement was of a different kind. It was like the taste for smoking, reached 'through peril, toil, and pain,' because the 'enjoyment' is forbidden, or because it is imagined that it is manly to seek it. What the elder brother of nineteen may do, you at fourteen will not be deterred from attempting.

Notice once more that, as in the physical world so in the mental, we can speak of 'cloying' tastes. A style, or an author, can satiate the appetite or cloy the palate, just as a food can. And what more than anything else marks the superiority of Taste proper and of the Acquired Taste over the Relishes is that they cloy much later and more rarely. We are far sooner cloyed with Seneca than with Cæsar : an epigrammatic or paradoxical style nauseates much sooner than a simple and straightforward one. I do not deny that we like the epigrams *as a change* ; but we speedily return to the plain and more nutritious fare.

It is needless to draw out the parallel farther ; and there is always the risk, in pursuing parallels, of landing ourselves in the contradictions and quagmires of infinity. But, ere I pass on, I might point out that, as the necessary condition of physical taste is solubility, so the necessary condition of its mental analogue is that the material given should be intelligible. Otherwise, taste does not enter at all, even as its own contrary. There are certain works of art which are so far outside our experience that we are not even disgusted by them. To bite on granite may hurt, but it causes no nausea ; and a child set to read *Sartor Resartus* or *Sordello* does not dislike the book ; he merely rejects it : if he dislikes anything at all, it is the useless toil. A boy who

says he hates Virgil hates him only at second-hand : it is the slavery of construing that he really loathes.

When a mental emotion vastly enlarges its range, it is obvious that the analogies which have been hitherto sufficient and satisfying must often be found inadequate. Thus a mathematician may sometimes cease to speak of doing a problem, and speak of wrestling with it or digging at it. He may renounce it for a while, and let it 'simmer.' But no mental emotion has enlarged its range, or deepened its intension, more enormously than artistic and literary taste. Starting from mere enjoyment or repulsion, it has grown with our growth, extended through all extent, spread undivided, and operated without exhausting itself. We may well, therefore, expect to find that analogies have constantly to be drawn from other senses : and in particular from those of hearing and sight. As, for example, our feeling for poetry deepens, we realise the inadequacy of such metaphors as sweet and bitter, pleasant and unpleasant, nice and nasty. We call on such images as sublimity, profundity, the distant, the near, the thunderous, the still and small, the great, the little, the weighty, the light. And finally, as other arts and sciences obtain their own special character and vocabulary, we draw on *them* to illustrate our own, and speak of the breadth of a musical composition, the tone of a painting, the balance of an essay, the rhythm of a landscape. And yet, amid all this wealth of metaphor, it will, I think, be found that the ultimate reference, the deciding factor, is our own *personal* enjoyment or distaste : the poem, the statue, the sonata is judged by a faculty for which, we instinctively feel, the appropriate analogy is to be found in the palate which appreciates our food. Taste

may be, as some say, the lowest of our senses : but there is something so ultimate about it that though we may at times seek something wider, we can rarely discover anything higher, to express our judgment of the loftiest, the most ethereal, the daintiest, the most solid and permanent, the most transient and vaporous, of all the emotions that an intellectual exercise can arouse in us.

Little is altered if we substitute the phrase 'æsthetic appreciation' for 'taste' in this sense. 'Æsthetic' is, of course, a metaphor derived not from the palate but from our powers of perception, and specially from those of seeing and hearing. It may seem, therefore, more generally suitable than what some may regard as a 'lower but loving likelihood.' On the other hand, if I am not mistaken, it has some disadvantages. It appears, for instance, at least at times, to presume the *objective* existence of beauty, independently of the percipient. As, for example, when we say 'We perceive a house,' we are tempted to believe that the house is there whether we perceive it or not, so when we say we perceive beauty, we are tempted to assume that the beauty is there quite apart from us the perceivers. On this tremendous question I do not intend to pronounce an opinion : it is one of those best left to the metaphysicians. It is pretty certain that they alone can deal with it : and it is equally certain that a question handed over to them will, like the woman in the Gospel, suffer many things from many metaphysicians, and be no better but rather the worse for their ministrations. What one metaphysician says about it another will deny : and Greek will meet Greek in endless logomachy. Is the Ode to a Nightingale *really* beautiful apart altogether from

the reader? Is sugar really sweet, or is the sweetness but a gift to it from us? This leads to another question, Does sugar itself exist, or is it a mere projection of our minds? And this later question, if ever solved, will probably be solved only at the expense of yet another interrogation. Coleridge, who derived the senses from the mind, might give our answer: 'O Lady, we receive but what we give, and in our life alone does Nature live': but Coleridge is not the only philosopher, and his view is not the only one. I purpose to leave all such enigmas on one side: allowing myself, however, one touch of the dogmatism which makes the whole world kin. Matter has been cautiously defined as the permanent possibility of sensation. I will venture—provided that I am not asked to defend the position—to define beauty as the permanent possibility of enjoyment. When you have found a 'beautiful' thing you can recur to it with a reasonable hope of enjoying it again. You may not always enjoy it as much as before, or in the same way, but the *chance* of enjoyment is there.

One more enigma may perhaps implore the passing tribute of a mention. Is there any criterion by which we can decide whether one taste is higher or lower than another? Some even to-day may have read Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*, and may recall the question he put to himself, 'How has your Beloved surpassed, so much, all others?' The answer was simple—'She is mine.' But though mere possession may thus decide the superiority of one girl to all others, we require more than this to prove the superiority of our tastes. We all know the contempt always felt, and not invariably dissembled, by certain wine-drinkers for the wretched creatures who cannot tell the difference

between a superior and an inferior brand. It is something which, once experienced, is likely to teach the sufferer a lifelong humility, and is in fact almost enough to account for all the 'inferiority complexes' with which Freud has ever been called to deal. But after all, is the thing so certain? Is there more in it than in Sir Willoughby Patterne's mere *sense* of his unassailable position above everybody else? Is there any *rational* ground, admitting of proof, why we should concede to these connoisseurs the eminence they somewhat arrogantly claim? Can they *prove* that champagne is better than lemonade, and if so, can they convince us that they feel the difference? The proverb gives the answer of the experience of the whole human race, '*Chacun à son goût.*' To each man his own taste is the only standard. In fact, the proverb is a truism: 'What I like best tastes best.'

When we turn from the material to the mental, we meet the same difficulty. 'It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied,' said John Stuart Mill; and his admission was taken as a renunciation of the whole case for hedonism, and for the quantitative measurement of happiness. It does, indeed, appear to involve a reliance upon some intuitive sense of values totally independent of reason, and as dogmatic, in effect, as Johnson's 'We know, and there's an end on't.' With literature the same question at once arises. After we have catalogued a few very simple and almost trifling indications of what all will recognise as good points, we are left to face endless disputes, eternal readjustments, innumerable personal equations, multitudinous mere prejudices, against which no amount of argument avails anything. If a man does not *like* Dickens, you cannot reason him into liking. If he

likes Edgar Wallace, there is no 'computatio sive logica' to demonstrate that he is doing what he ought not to do. As well try by syllogism to make a man who detests marmalade revel in it, as seek by argument to convert a man of a certain literary taste to another.

Attempts have often been made to get over this difficulty, and by none more ably than by Mr. Stace in his recent book on the *Meaning of Beauty*. He draws a distinction between *Æsthetics* and *Taste*, the one being in his opinion scientific and solid, the other unstable and personal. Those who have been puzzled by the varieties of ethical doctrine existing in different times and places have sometimes, to save ethics from total destruction, recalled to us the fact that though conscience may lay down different precepts in different cases, she is still conscience. She may say sometimes this is right, and sometimes the same thing is wrong: but she always recognises *a* right and *a* wrong. Similarly, if I understand Mr. Stace, he would maintain that though one man may like a poem and another dislike it, both have somewhere a standard of excellence, an *æsthetic* conscience, the possession of which is an indication that there is in us all *an* Idea of Beauty, though we may apply it variously. A man may prefer the *Grecian Urn* to the *Nightingale*; but he sees beauty in both. If, says Mr. Stace, he thinks them ugly, we have a right to say he is a man who either has not yet gained an *æsthetic* conscience, or has seared it with a hot iron.

It will be plain as we proceed that I am no believer in an *innate* *æsthetic* conscience of the kind Mr. Stace and so many others believe to exist. Or, at any rate, if it be so deeply rooted in *us* to-day, the heirs of

all the ages, that it may not unfairly be called innate, I see no reason for believing that it was so in the beginning. I shall try to show later that it has in all probability developed, by a natural evolution, from very simple feelings : that the sense of beauty or ugliness, which now seems so instantaneous, is a growth from something much more primitive than itself, which has in the first instance little apparent relation to beauty or ugliness, and which might conceivably, had circumstances been different, have evolved into something quite other than what we now see. At least, I am pretty sure of this, that *individual* appearances we now call beautiful might quite easily have been to-day thought ugly and *vice versa*. Nay, we can see this very thing happening before our very eyes. We need but look around, or in ourselves, and we see taste, or the æsthetic faculty—call it what you will—constantly changing both in individuals and in communities. The causes are by no means always obvious ; but the effects are very visible, and in the midst of much obscurity and irregularity we can, if only with difficulty, detect certain laws. A man grows older, and his tastes change by the mere process of the years. They are a function of the whole man, and vary as he varies. He becomes satiated with an old style and demands a new ; or he grows fixed in the capacity to enjoy an old style and rejects the new with disgust. Especially is this the case when middle age is past. Some men rest in memory, and want no further experience. I have known people who, having heard Liszt play, would never listen to another pianist, and others, in a different sphere, who, having seen W. G. Grace bat, would never watch a cricket-match. great change in external circumstances, again, as from

poverty to wealth or *vice versa*, may alter a man's whole outlook on life, and with it his susceptibility to certain forms of literature or art : as the War altered the taste of a whole generation. There may be changes in the taste of the circle in which he moves, and these changes will act on him according to his temperament. If he is easily influenced by others, he will, like Mr. Pickwick, shout with the crowd, and, should there be two crowds, he will shout with the larger. If he is stubborn and independent, the movement of the crowd will probably drive him further in the opposite direction than he would otherwise have gone. As an old lady of my acquaintance once observed, 'I pay not the slightest attention to the opinions of other people. If they tell me they think one thing, I think the opposite harder than ever.'

It is a mistake to press far the likeness between a community and an individual. Yet there are certain similarities. A community, like a man, may take to the new simply from satiety with the old ; or it may cling to a fashion simply because a neighbouring community has rejected it ; or again it may, for no assignable reason, imitate its neighbour. A crowd may be stubborn, conservative, radical, vacillating, as an inexplicable whim may take it. And it will stick to its tastes, or take up new ones, in the same inexplicable way. The historical analyst, coming solemnly to the study of these unreasoned rebellions or equally unreasoned loyalties, is perplexed to account for them. He is like Pope when he began to contemplate the 'mighty maze' of mankind as a whole : or like the father in Wordsworth's poem when his boy preferred Kilve to Liswyn Farm. He is lucky if he reaches a satisfactory solution as that supplied by the pestered

child. He finds dubious causes in great upheavals, in victories, in defeats, in national triumphs or humiliations ; sometimes, but rarely, in the influence of a great man : but as a rule he is guessing, and knows he is guessing. Men, like the ship of the Ancient Mariner, are often driven by winds, and of the wind we know not whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. And often their ideas are held becalmed by a spirit that works nine fathom below the surface of the sea, invisible, and to be detected only in dreams. Of one point, however, we can be sure, that the taste for one kind of literary excitement or another is due less to the literature itself than to its association with something else.

And, as these associations are necessarily different in any one man from what they are in every other, we must not be surprised if there are great differences in our appreciations of what, for the sake of convenience, we call the 'same' work. Nay, as no man is the same for a day together, *his* judgments of the 'same' work must alter. 'Beauty,' says Walter Pater, 'like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative : and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. The aim of all true criticism,' he goes on, 'is to inquire, 'what is this song or picture, this engaging personality, to *me*? Does it give me pleasure, and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is *my* nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? He who experiences those impressions strongly has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself—a metaphysical question as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere.'

If this be so, and so I think it to be, a full analysis

of taste would involve a full, and therefore impossible, analysis of the lives, circumstances, and characters of all the persons to whom the particular work comes—an obviously impossible task. And, on the other hand, the acquisition, or the bestowal, of a sound taste might seem equally impossible, for it might appear that we should have to alter, by main force, the whole circumstances, ancestry, and character of any person we met whose taste we thought bad but wanted to improve. But the difficulty is, as usual in such cases, solved *ambulando*. As the theologians speak of religion as a life, and not as a mere science of living, a life of which the vitalising elements are supplied to you as you go along, so with taste. If you want to live a good life, do not go seeking for another than what you have—just live as well as you can the life that you have to live every day—it will give you plenty of means of living well. So, if you want a good taste, do not go making violent changes in your reading. Only try to read as well as you can the books you like. It will soon appear, with regard to some of them, that if you *do* read them carefully and well, they will themselves provide you with the judgment that will reject them. If a schoolboy reads *thoughtfully* a bad novel, putting his best self into it, he will soon begin to care for higher literature. To quote a despised Victorian author, he will rise on stepping-stones of his dead self to higher things.

And here, as with other kinds of goodness, lies the consolatory aspect of a truth which I venture to enunciate—though with trepidation. Religion, we are told, has primarily nothing to do with the intellect, though plenty of religious men have intellect enough. And so with the subject of our inquiry. Primarily,

and in essence, matters of taste, being matters of *living*, have little to do with the intellect ; nor is there any reason why an artist, *as such*, or an appreciator of art, as such, should be a highly intellectual person—though the intellect comes in to aid them both. When Opie said that he mixed his colours with brains, he showed that he had even less mental capacity than an artistic genius. Real brains, downright hard thinking, are not necessarily characteristic of the artist pure and simple : they are the mark of the mathematician, the physicist, the chess-player. It is true that many artists are also men of brains ; but that is an accident. It is also true, conversely, that many mathematical theorems and chess-games are full of beauty. I know no poem more beautiful than the exponential series, and no painting more beautiful than some of Morphy's chess-games. But beauty is not the essence of mathematics, and Morphy did not win his game by the beauty of his combinations—it was the accuracy that confounded his antagonists. So, on the other hand, it may be possible to compare Burke and Milton, as intellectual giants, with Newton and Faraday : but the *artistic* beauty of their works is a function not of their intellect but of their taste. In *Paradise Lost* the intellect is clearly there, and it is obviously immense : but it is quite subsidiary. The same intellectual power, without the taste, would have produced the ' Chaos Restored ' of which Pope speaks in the *Dunciad*.

In a lesser degree, the same thing is true of the *appreciation* of art. So far as we appreciate, we are artists, and by no means necessarily people of brain. At first hearing, this may discourage or exasperate many readers ; but let us look on the bright side. As I said

a moment ago, this truth *has* a cheerful aspect : and, as Job said to his friends, ‘Hear diligently my speech, and let this be your consolations.’ Many of us are uneasily conscious of inferiority as we compare ourselves with certain highly-endowed acquaintances of ours, to whom the integral calculus is no mystery, and who sport with Relativity in the shade. Let us take comfort. We have access to realms of beauty which provide full compensation. The Senior Wrangler who said that poetry proved nothing had *his* reward. He could sit down and prove the provable. We can, humbly and modestly, sit down and enjoy the enjoyable : and that enjoyment sometimes reaches an intensity and an exaltation which hardly anything else on earth is capable of giving : and which, unlike most other pleasures, does not wear out by use, but intensifies with every exercise of it, and can be renewed at will.

I cannot, indeed, better express my meaning than by applying to this exaltation, arising from literary study, the words which John Smith, one of the glories of seventeenth-century Cambridge, applied to the study of theology :

‘Were I to define divinity, I should rather call it a divine life than a divine science. To seek our divinity merely among books and writings (that is, in the intellect) is to seek the living among the dead : we do but in vain seek God many times in these, where His truth too often is not so much inshrined as entombed : no, seek for God within thine own soul ; he is best discerned, as Plotinus phraseth it, by an intellectual *touch*. The soul itself hath its sense as well as the body ; and therefore David, when he would teach us to know what the divine goodness is, calls not for speculation but sensation : *Taste*, saith he, and

see how good the Lord is. That is not the best and truest knowledge of God which is wrought out by the labour and sweat of the brain, but that which is kindled in us by a heavenly warmth in our hearts. When the tree of knowledge is not planted by the tree of life, and sucks not up sap from thence, it may as well be fruitful with evil as with good. Such as men are, such will God himself seem to be.'

Similarly with the lower but equally true delights of literature. Literature, too, is not a science but a life. To gain these delights to the full, we must touch and taste: the taste may indeed be intellectual, but high intellect is not necessary to it. We need no *understanding* equal or superior to that of the poet to taste and see how good the poem is, or to attain the winged souls which may appreciate the highest heaven of invention, and gaze like Beatrice at the sun of genius. We need not so much the intellect of a Newton as the capacity to feel. Such as we are in ourselves and in our daily lives, such will Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante seem to be.

II

THE EVOLUTION OF TASTE

LITERATURE, to dress a platitude in the garb of paradox, began before letters existed. It may seem unnecessary to emphasise so obvious a point : and yet so great a scholar as Gaston Paris thought it desirable to dwell upon it in the beginning of his history of early French literature. Nor is it a mere fact without a meaning. I shall have many opportunities of noting how frequently fashions, once living and needful, tend to survive when the cause that brought them into existence has ceased to operate : and there are many features in written literature which have thus survived from the oral stage. Many, for example, of Homer's devices for helping his memory—his repetitions, his tags, his prayers to the Muses—which once had a real importance, have descended as fashions not merely to Virgil and Milton, but to Glover and Blackmore, and end—or rather do *not* end—in the mocking mimicries of Pope or Byron.

We tend to forget the obvious : yet we shall be wise to keep in remembrance the simple fact that there is no *vital* difference between prose or poetry spoken and prose or poetry written—vast as the unessential differences have come to be : and to employ the word literature is to seize upon an accident, instead of an essential, as the ground of definition. The word, however, is now established and irremovable.

and we must stick to it. I imagine that if we ever discovered that ants or bees had some sort of story-telling or other intellectual enjoyment, as distinct from mere business-messages, which they passed on to their neighbours by means of their antennæ, we should still have to call it literature. At any rate we must always remember that, as a manuscript never printed may yet be the highest form of literature, so a poem never reduced even to manuscript may be literature too. The poems of Homer, the sagas of Iceland, were literature none the less because for hundreds of years they remained unwritten; and conversely an inscription or a Bradshaw's Guide is not literature because it uses letters to convey its information.

To discover the beginnings of literature, then, we must investigate not writing but speech: and here I know no book better worth study than Jespersen's *Language*—though I do not imagine that some of the books of our schooldays are altogether superseded; and in particular I retain a fondness for Darmesteter's *La Vie des Mots*. There is some truth, amid much that has been shown to be mistaken, in Max Müller's *Science of Language*; but in all sciences the later works either are, or ought to be, better than the earlier, and no science has advanced more rapidly than philology and semantics. It may be that even Jespersen is now out of date. Whether this is the case or not, he is worth consulting. He holds, apparently, that the power of *communication* arises in us somewhat later than we might suppose. A child's screaming, he thinks, though it draws the mother to his side, does not *summon* her; it is not the child's way of *saying* 'I am in pain' or 'I want food,' any more than the kicking

of its feet means 'I feel happy.' These are but more or less reflex actions, limited to the child's own world, and involve no attempt to explain his emotions to others. We have to start a little later. True speech, according to the best authorities, would begin with some sort of musical intonation, or possibly with a semi-musical lilt. 'The progenitors of man,' says Darwin, 'probably uttered musical tones before they had acquired the power of articulate speech'; and we may imagine that they contrived, by this musical means, to effect some rough communication with their neighbours. But this, I think, would be from the very first combined with imitation, both vocal and 'actional': the hands, the head, the feet, nay the whole body, would come to the aid of the tongue, and the play of the features would unconsciously add force to the sounds. Darwin notices that children, when using scissors, move their mouths in scissor-fashion. Can we doubt that our ancestors, in *describing* the throwing of a stone, or the rush of a tiger, would *act* the incidents? An animal would be represented, possibly, by a mimicry of its roar, its death by a mimic death. Nay, there are some who believe that the simple mathematics of early man were done by imitations: *one* was expressed by a rounded mouth, *two* by showing both rows of teeth, and *three* by the teeth with the tongue between them. There, in all likelihood, numerical science stopped for centuries: it was long before *five* was shown by the fingers of the hand, and longer still before *ten* was seen to be the fingers of both hands.¹

¹ The evolution of mathematics has been closely studied of late years, and the counting-powers of savages have been investigated with precision. It is enough to refer to Galton's *Tropical South Africa*

The power of expression attained by these simple means would probably be very great: much greater than we, who have so largely superseded action by words, can easily conceive. I doubt not that whole narratives of furious encounters, of wounds, of hair-breadth escapes, of moving accidents by flood and field, would be conveyed by primitive Othellos to primeval Desdemonas, and that to hear, and *see*, them, Desdemona would seriously and literally incline. That a practically full conception may thus be communicated could be shown by many instances. One will do for a thousand. A missionary told me that, in a wild part of India, he came upon a crowd listening to a professional tale-teller. He joined the throng, and *watched*; for the tale was being told in a language of which he did not understand a single word. But so vivid, so ferocious was the acting of the man, that he followed the story without difficulty, and, on repeating his idea of it to a friend who had *heard* it, found that he had lost nothing but a few insignificant details. Much more would this be the case in still more savage communities.

Now imagine that in the tribe there was one man who stood out from the rest in this art of narrative. He would please by a variety of powers. First, the mere *sounds* might be what his fellows would regard as attractive: his intonations might be clear and musical, and his rhythms distinct and easily caught by his audience. Secondly, we cannot doubt that his

and Rae's *Eskimos*. But something was known long since. Condamine, the author of the *Account of a Savage Girl*, met a tribe that could not count beyond four. 'This,' said Dr. Johnson, 'should be told to Monboddo, and would help him to prove his favourite theory'—that men are descended from monkeys. *Tour to the Hebrides*, September 23, 1773.

imitations of the rustling of trees, the rippling of waters, the voices of animals, the whistling of winds, the hissing of rain, would be so exact as to convey to his hearers instantaneously the wished ideas. Possibly he had a certain power of parody or comic imitation; this would give added pleasure. Without quite knowing why, the tribe would prefer such a man to a weaker performer. They would have a *taste*, or rather a relish, for his stories and, in comparison, a *distaste*, or rather a disgust, for those of others. They would, we imagine, not *criticise* overtly; but they would do what the Elizabethan audiences did with *Julius Cæsar* and with *Catiline*; they would throng to the one and stay away from the other—or possibly show their likes and dislikes in a still more drastic manner.

When sounds were combined into something resembling sentences, and the tunes into something resembling airs, the old associations would remain. The words *describing* ugly things would be ugly at second-hand, and what *described* beautiful things would similarly be beautiful; for there would still remain the vivid associations with terror or delight, and, what is equally important, the very sounds that had so exactly imitated the things which had roused those emotions. These sounds, *recalling* pleasure or fear, would come in time to be, in themselves, pleasurable or terrible, even when used without direct reference to the things which had been called up by those sounds. A literary sense would thus be gradually created, and there would arise a perception of literary beauty, as words were employed which, by association with pleasurable things, had come to be thought, or rather felt, beautiful in themselves. A habit would be formed, which could not be distinguished from an

intuition. But it is not difficult to see that it was but habit after all. If a cobra had happened to sing, and a nightingale to hiss, the song, being associated with fear and horror, would have sounded ugly, and the mimic hiss would at least have been neutral, associated as it would have been with something quite harmless. If men knew nothing of laughter but as the cry of a hyæna, and nothing of the *word* but as the mimicry of the cry made by narrators of encounters with that loathsome beast, the word 'laughter' would itself be hideous. The test can easily be applied. There are words in English which are pleasant or unpleasant. Exactly the same sounds in other languages, being associated with different things, are often the exact reverse.

It is easy, however, also, to perceive how these associations might in some cases be corrected. As men conquered their terrors, it would be possible to snatch a fearful joy out of terror itself; and primitive poets might anticipate Aristotle's tragedians by 'purging the mind of pity and fear' through the operation of those very emotions. If a man, describing how he had succeeded in killing a tiger, was a good narrator, he would learn that there is a delight in *remembering* the roars and growls which, though fearful at the time had proved harmless in the end. 'Haec olim meminisse iuvabit' is a saying that will apply to anxieties and dangers overcome long before the time of Æneas and such a narrator would soon learn how to increase the final satisfaction of his hearers by piling up the preliminary horrors. Every time he did so, the taste of the hearers would be enlarged, so as to include the pleasure to be derived from pain: a new set of associations, both verbal and 'actional,' would be formed and

unconsciously handed on. Among the hearers, of course, would be future narrators, at the most susceptible period of their lives, catching tones, gestures, and collocations of words which they perceived to be effective, and storing them up for use when the opportunity should arise. A literary language would thus, in a few generations, be formed: the orators would use it, and the audiences would expect it.

On such points as these, of course, certainty is unattainable; but we have good authority for believing that even the song the sirens sang, or the name of Hecuba's mother, is not beyond all conjecture. Something like what I have been suggesting may have happened, and, viewing the results, we may say that something not very dissimilar *must* have happened. We can dimly perceive how, at a very early stage, certain words or collocations of words were believed to have a magical efficacy—a belief which is by no means dead even yet—and as soon as this happened, those words or collocations would put on a beauty or an ugliness according as the magic in them was supposed to be protective or destructive. If the pronunciation of a word would bring you food or kill a wild animal, that word would be beautiful; if it was used to bring down a curse on your head, it would be ugly. We can trace, further, in some cases the nature of these powerful collocations. To judge by the almost universal delight in puns and assonances at certain stages in the historical evolution of literature, one may be tolerably certain that 'in the beginning' the delight was still greater. If Samson could celebrate his triumph over the Philistines with a threefold pun, if the Philistines, when their turn came, could retort on him

with a fivefold rhyme,¹ we may presume that long before Samson, our ancestors, discovering that the same sound might have two meanings, or that two or three sounds coming near one another might happen to jingle, would ascribe to such coincidences a magical force, and would gain pleasure from the discovery. We need not go far in search of illustrations. Ever Shakespeare found a pleasure, like that of stout Cortes, when he hit on a word like 'will,' 'light' or 'gilt,' which could do multiple service: much more the Palæolithic man. The Book of Genesis, especially in its earliest parts, is full of puns: it is not hard to picture the glee of the first teller who saw that one could play nicely with 'Babel' and 'balbal.' And the glee would deepen as the hidden *force* of the consonance was revealed. If a man's name turned out to be capable of two applications, it would be pleasant to realise its magic power. 'Gad,' for instance, was perhaps originally the name of a god; but use it to mean 'happy,' and you secured the prosperity of the tribe: use it for 'troop,' and you gave a further impulse to the tribal fortunes, while giving yours the delight of conscious power. Beyond reasonable doubt, such accidents would be even more significant and pleasing in still earlier times. When it was noticed further, that lilts could be measured, and that one rhythm could be matched with another, the charm would gain an added potency. It was with this sort of thing that what we may tentatively call poetry first began. It was a union of the measured stroke marked by the feet (whence perhaps the name)

¹ 'Chamór chamór chamórathāim.' The Philistine retort may be represented thus: 'And so our foe that laid us low, and wrought our woe, is made a show.'

for the unit of metre) with words, that started the enormous output of poetry which has since staggered the world. And it was magical, or religious, call it which you will. For those who desire further information, I cannot do better than refer them to Professor Gilbert Murray's chapter on the "Molpë" in his *Classical Tradition in Poetry*. He there shows how Greek poetry (and here it is more or less a type of all poetry) began with the 'dance-and-song,' the origin of which was ascribed to Apollo and the Muses. The bard started the music; his chorus beat the floor with their feet; and then he began his song. The floor, when thus used, became 'divine,' for the Molpë was a divine service, a piece of magic. If a threshing-floor, it produced fruitfulness, as the tug-of-war does in many countries even to-day. If it was by a fountain, it ensured that the fountain would not run dry. It was from such crude beginnings that the highly elaborated Odes of Pindar ultimately sprang; and it would seem that Pindar himself knew it. The First Pythian gives us an almost archæological account of this development. But even those who do not know Greek need not go outside our own literature to learn much about it. Gray, in his *Progress of Poetry*, imitating that very Ode, tells us nearly all we can wish to learn. He shows how the Golden Lyre is the gift of Apollo and the Muses, how the voice and dance obey the lyre, and how the rosy-crown'd Loves are seen

With antic Sport and blue-eyed Pleasures,
Frisking light in frolic measures,
Now pursuing, now retreating,
Now in circling troops they meet;
To brisk notes in cadence beating,
Glance their many-twinkling feet.

But not merely the choric Ode had this original. From a like beginning sprang the epic—it was thus that Demodocus sang his lay to Alcinous—and from this beginning sprang the drama.

For ere long, or perhaps after centuries, it was perceived that the dance and the words might be separated. Even Apollo was not always accompanied by his Muses. The Delphian oracle, it is true, was said to have uttered the first hexameter verse, but these verses were spoken or chanted by one person, without the necessity of a chorus. From this recognition would proceed, by gradual steps, the narrative poem, and the metrical speech, which later became the dialogue. It may have been the desire to use the magic of verse against an enemy that led to the Fescennine verses of which Horace speaks, or to the ‘gephurism’ of the Greek women—the insults hurled at each other when crossing a bridge—or to the composition of ‘runes’ to bring down disaster upon someone’s head. Sometimes the versified ‘flyting’ had another aim; it was, by exhausting the power of the curse during sacred periods in which it would be harmless, to make it harmless at other times also. We know, of course, that it lost its religious character, degenerated into mere abuse, and had to be stopped ‘formidine fustis’: much as the consecrated libels of the Attic comedy had to be checked by law: but its religious origin was never quite forgotten. In some countries even the gods were represented as thus ‘flyting,’ or engaging in abusing-matches: the *Lokasenna*, or Loki’s Abuse of the Gods, is well known, and there is something like it in *Bandamanna saga*. Even so late as the fifteenth century the custom was kept up: the set-to between Dunbar and Kennedy, though tolerably vigorous, had

a peculiar underlying tone which seems to show that it was meant to be taken, if not in a sacred, yet in a Pickwickian sense: this was because the old religious atmosphere still clung to the mimic warfare.

It is impossible to believe that in the hearers of early poetry, taste ever advanced further than the most rudimentary 'criticism.' They knew, of course, that they 'preferred' one bard to another: the magic of the one was the more powerful, his incantations more compelling. But they might 'prefer' him only in the sense that they were more afraid of him: that they dreaded his pronunciation of some rune or spell which would bring disaster, and which had in the past prevailed over the protective rune of the other. Or, in the tribal gathering, they might find themselves carried away by the rhythm of his words and the vigour of his performances on his rude musical instrument. Again, when going to battle against their enemies, under the inspiration of their own bard, they might if victorious, dully compare him favourably with the poet of their opponents. Beyond this, I do not think they would ever go. Nor do I think there was much self-criticism done by the bards themselves. Accustomed to sing under an excitement which they regarded as divine, they would ascribe an occasional failure not so much to a weakness of their own as to the anger of the god, who, we may be sure, would oftener be smiting their hearers with stupidity than themselves with incapacity. As their songs were usually, if not always, improvisations, they would show all the characteristics of extempore performances, in which literary defects are covered up by force in the delivery or magnificence in the accessories.

would be not only material but formal. A clumsy line would be, sooner or later, amended into smoothness ; and every improvement that made such a line more tuneful, and therefore more easy to remember, would be the work of an untutored criticism, resting on a rudimentary taste. For example, it may be observed that some of the Anglo-Saxon gnomes alliterate very poorly. It would be the work of this untutored criticism to complete the alliteration. Thus in the later gnomes we find

Life strives with death, light with darkness,
Fyrd with fyrd, foe with foe,
Loathed one with loathed one on the land striveth ;
After death-day doom we must abide
In the Father's face : the future lieth
Dark and dismal :

whereas in those I quoted above the alliteration is feeble.

With the growth of a poetical vocabulary, and the accumulation of a set of stock phrases, we may imagine that the eternal conflict between the older generation and the younger would find new material : the old resenting any change and the young demanding it : the old relying on the wisdom of the ages, and the young protesting, like Sydney Smith in his dispute with Toryism, that the further back you went the chubbier the children you found, and that the wisdom of the ages was but infantile folly. In this conflict, unless it were summarily settled by the simple method of clubbing the weaker party, something like reasons would be found for preferring one style to the other : often, doubtless, irrelevant, but one can detect much irrelevance in the most apparently profound and philosophical criticism even in the present day. As

A sort of criticism, I think, was more likely to grow up alongside of the short gnomes and couplets which passed from mouth to mouth, and became part and parcel of the wisdom of whole communities.¹ All languages, of course, show plenty of these. Everyone's own studies will have brought to his notice the Anglo-Saxon specimens, which bear evident traces that they are but settings of old sayings : just as the Proverbs of Solomon must in many cases be much more ancient than Solomon. 'Wind is in air swiftest, thunder at times loudest, weired strongest, winter coldest, Lent most rainy, summer sunniest' ; these, though summing-up ordinary experience, are not very striking or elegant in expression. Passing as they did from man to man, they allowed time for reflection and would inevitably be criticised, either as inaccurate in their statement of fact, or as poor in diction. The reader will recall examples from his own childhood. I remember, for instance, hearing the rhyme, 'Rainbow at morning is the shepherd's warning : rainbow at night is the shepherd's delight.' Young as I was, I compared this with the facts, and found it not true. It was therefore with some pleasure that I heard another boy say that the correct version was 'Re-sky,' not 'rainbow' : and this I found to be more nearly representative of natural laws. Who can doubt that similar 'material' criticisms were passed on much earlier maxims ? What is said about everyday things *can* be thus criticised : what is said about your ancestors is not open to such tests. And the criticism

¹ These seem to show an advance, or at least a change, in the popular habits. In Greece, and probably also elsewhere, they were spoken rather than chanted or sung : and we hear of the reciters as actually sitting, like Deborah under her palm tree. (See the *Theatre of the Greeks*, pp. 32, 33.)

now, so then : minds were made up beforehand, and reasons were invented afterwards. I dare say that the Athenians, who fined Phrynichus for reminding them of their failure to save Miletus from the Persians, did not own to themselves that they were really venting their own remorse on the dramatist. They would say that the play was *artistically* bad. Criticism, in this case, was an excuse or a pretext ; and often enough in later times it has been the same thing. What we do not like to hear, even if we know it to be the truth we choose to find badly expressed. Exactly the same style, if conveying pleasing matter, would be warmly praised. The messenger, bringing good tidings to the Sultan, is rewarded : a week later, bringing evil, he is condemned to the bowstring—on the ground that he is losing his oratorical powers.

Gradually, of course, as a few men here and there gain the capacity of discrimination, and learn to distinguish between matter and manner, we find a judgment of style in itself. But even to-day this is rarer than we are inclined to imagine. It is certain that when a critic believes he is censuring a style he is often moved by dislike of the substance. I remember once remarking to a scientific friend of mine how strange it was that in *Sordello*, harsh and crabbed as so much of it is, should occur two such lovely lines as these :

‘ New pollen on the lily-petal blows,
And still more labyrinthine buds the rose.’

But my friend, though not destitute of literary feeling, would or could see no beauty in them. They were ugly ; and he then proceeded to show why they were ugly : the botany was, it appeared, all wrong. The

majority of novel-readers, I am sure, judge the style of a novel, if they think of it at all, by the plot: and indeed it is not easy to be sure they are mistaken. Even so profound and minute a student of words and phrases as Henry James¹—even this perhaps over-precious stylist, exquisite both in French and in English, found some of the greatest masters of French style unreadable because of the subjects on which they chose to write, and actually went so far as to say that style and matter were inseparably one. On similar grounds Cardinal Newman refused to allow the name of poetry to Byron's so-called immoral writings, and asserted—in direct contradiction to the opinion of Dr. Johnson—that revealed religion was essentially poetical. This was because, so soon as poetry ceased to be religious, it ceased to engage Newman's sympathy. But I am straying beyond the bounds of my immediate subject, and must leave my reader for the present to make his own reflections on this subject. It will come up again.

Let us now take a very wide leap, and arrive at the time when one of the greatest of all inventions, writing and its correlative reading, have pretty firmly established themselves. The likelihood has not, I think, been sufficiently emphasised that writing and reading would alter taste, and alter it enormously. Scores of poems, which had pleased when recited, would be found wanting when read. For one reason, when *you* read a poem, *you* are the reciter, and your recitation is and must be different from that of the poet or the rhapsode. The gestures that have attracted you are no longer there; the tricks that have deceived you are but matters of feeble memory. I suppose that

¹ See Morris Roberts, *Henry James's Criticism*, p. 37 *et al.*

some of the most effective speeches made since Demosthenes were Gladstone's in the Midlothian campaign. Of them a good judge said, 'I have heard all the greatest orators of my time, and the greatest actors: but if I had not heard the Midlothian speeches I should not have had the faintest idea of what can be achieved by the human voice.' But read them now, and where is their power? The flashing eyes of the orator are dim, the gestures are still, the withering scorn in the tone is inaudible, and, more than all, the passions of the time are silent and the hypnotism of the idolising crowds is not there. Your taste for them can never be like that of your grandfathers. The whole tremendous struggle has sunk, like the Crusades, to silence, and one says of it, as of the old knight, 'Dead the warrior, dead his glory, dead the cause in which he died.'

On the other hand, the fact that so many of Burke's speeches failed when spoken is a matter of historical fact, and of vast historical importance. Had they been as impressive in Parliament as they were and are in the study, the whole history of the world might have been changed: America might have remained in the Empire, and our Indian troubles might not have been. To the immortal speech on the Nabob of Arcot Debts Pitt, looking at the empty benches, thought it needless to reply: it was published, and it shook the educated country. The House of Commons, which was not educated, it did not shake.

In a lesser degree the same thing is constantly seen. In my youth I heard John Bright: and I shall have occasion to refer to his speeches again. One of those speeches I well remember. I did indeed admire it when spoken—who could help admiring it?—but

admired it far more when I read it verbatim in the paper next day. There was a beauty born of the un murmuring sound of silent mental reading, which exceeded even the beauty of that melodious voice and the added impressiveness of one of the most striking personalities I ever saw: and the extraordinarily exquisite choice of words, rich with all the associations of Milton and the Bible, was more easily perceptible to the reader than to the hearer. If anyone wishes to *see* the English language, at its simplest and best, I know no place when he is more likely to find it than in some of the *printed* speeches of John Bright.

Thus the spoken and the read are never *quite* the same: one may be now better than the other; now worse, or their merits may be nearly equal—but they are different. Even when nearly equal, they are *magis pares quam similes*: and we have to consider literature, in these aspects, as not one thing but two things. Every book, every page, is one thing, spoken, and another, read.

Again, you can read a poem twice or thrice or many times. Who feels the tenth time quite as he felt the first? One recalls the story of Lysias, which Macaulay liked to repeat. Lysias made a speech for a man who had a case coming on in the Law Courts. After a week the man returned, and demanded another—the speech was bad. ‘When I read it through the first time, I thought it magnificent; but now I know it by heart it seems so poor I do not dare to speak it.’ ‘Just so,’ said Lysias, ‘but remember the judges will hear it only once.’ There is a world of wisdom in that anecdote.

But further, there is a second stage in reading perhaps even more important than the first—the stage at which

we cease to read aloud, even to ourselves, but carry through the whole process in the mind. Many of us can remember the date of this change in our own reading, and the immense revolution it caused in our whole mental outlook. One might almost date from that point the realisation of the distinction between the outer and the inner world, the 'ego' and the 'non-ego.' But we do not realise how long it took before this change took place in the world at large. As that great scholar S. H. Butcher remarks in his 'Harvard Lectures,' the whole Græco-Roman world read, when it read at all, aloud: and the very idea of mental reading had scarcely arisen. He refers, by way of illustration, to the curious passage in which Augustine describes his wonder when he saw Ambrose reading without even moving his lips. Had Ambrose been a Manichee, Augustine would have called it a trick of the devil; but in the case of so good a man as Ambrose he decided, there would be nothing wrong about it.

Now when reading reaches this Ambrosian stage which it now has done through the whole civilised world, it sets up a style and taste of its own, quite distinct from those appropriate to a literature which is an affair of the voice only. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this advance: it marks a difference, to a very great degree, between ancient and modern criticism—the ancients troubling so much about sounds, and we so much about thoughts. We can make the experiment for ourselves. We shall find that a poem silently read has a metrical beauty or ugliness strangely remote from the beauty or ugliness it would show if it were read aloud. We hear it, we hear it with the ears of the mind; and these mental sounds are not by any means exact reproduction

those the outer world would hear. A first-rate musician may, in reading a score, hear in his mind exactly, or nearly exactly, what he is about to hear when the score is rendered in the concert-hall: though even he, I believe, finds *some* addition to what he has heard. But when we read a poem of Tennyson or Keats there is little or nothing of the kind. There is a *sight-audition*, and the mere appearance of the page has much to do with it. A harshness or a smoothness that is *invisible* the mind neglects to notice. Many of us must often have *seen* a beauty in a page of poetry, which, when the verses are read aloud, is discovered to be no longer there.

It may be interesting here to give incidentally another example. All will know that Wordsworth was constantly observed to be wildly excited as he conned over some of the prosiest lines of the *Excursion*. This was partly vanity, from which, with all his greatness, Wordsworth was by no means free. But it was, I think, largely due to something else. Wordsworth read, or declaimed, his poems *aloud*, and thought of them as recitations rather than as signs on paper. He often recited them to himself, out of doors, with such furor that the villagers used to remark how old William had broken out again. Now I have tried the experiment, and I think if the reader tries it also he will be astonished at the result. Let him take one of those prosy passages, try to get up a little excitement about it (even, if humble enough, fancy it is his own) and read it with as much force as he can muster, out of doors for preference. He will, if I am not mistaken, discover that the prose has put on poetry. This is because Wordsworth wrote, or composed, to hear himself: he made his poems, often without pencil or

paper, *aloud* ; and he fails, again and again, to be duly appreciated because he is tested by silent reading. He did not realise the effect of his verses on people who never read aloud : and that is one of the reasons why so much of his poetry is flat and unprofitable to-day. On the other hand, the worship which Coleridge paid to him is largely explained by the fact that he *heard* so much of the poetry, recited on those long and open air West of England walks.

Conversely, many of the verses which Robert Bridges thought inharmonious, he thought so because he *looked* at them. He saw consonants crowded together, and fancied they would not pronounce easily. Had he tried, he would have found that many of them so heavy in appearance, ran lightly and easily from the tongue. There are lines in the *Sensitive Plant* which *seem* open to censure ; but it is only seeming after

With prose the case is the same. By a pleasant illusion we *imagine* a series of sounds, and enjoy them though they correspond to nothing in reality ; many a writer has gained credit for a harmonious simply because, as things are now, reading aloud is uncommon, and the hearing eye slides easily over roughnesses which become instantly apparent when the test of recitation is applied. The mind-voice glides gently along the page : the outward ear speaks and brings clumsiness to light. And as writers write for the inner ear, this kind of harmony will be more and more cultivated, and the old more and more neglected.¹

¹ Let the reader, by way of experiment, read a few pages of nineteenth-century writing, which were composed before the art of *graphing* had been studied as it has been since. He will notice how a mechanical device has become a stylistic aid. The same thing

Some idea of the immense change of taste which the introduction of writing must have brought about may be obtained by considering facts which are before our own eyes. We constantly observe that the same passage appears altogether different in writing, in typescript, and in print. Each of these systems of communication, having established its own standard of taste, constrains the same piece of literature to arouse varying degrees of pleasure or aversion in our minds. As a letter, for instance, in typescript, carrying business-associations, and being so obviously destined for speedy consignment to the waste-paper basket, only with difficulty stirs feelings of friendship and intimacy, so a story or an essay read in typescript starts suggestions which have to be vigorously checked if we are to appreciate it duly. We read writing in one way, typing in another, and print in a third. How much more strongly marked must have been the revolution when the voice was first transferred to vellum or papyrus, or when, as Macaulay imagined, the poet-laureate of Babylon, instead of mouthing his panegyrics of the King, published a bridge and four walls in his praise! It may be said that we can still recite a poem as well as read it, and thus compare the two effects. But recitation as an *alternative* to reading can never be what recitation was when it was the *sole* means of publishing it to the world. For of old the hearers could compare one recitation with another: we, to-day, compare the

seen, in exaggerated fashion, if he considers other mechanical devices, such as footnotes, appendices, and genealogical tables. All these are incorporated in the *text* of ancient writers, and spoil their *style*. For instance, there can be no doubt that had the appendix or the footnote existed in the time of Thucydides, he would have thrown the episode of Pisistratus and his sons, which now so gravely disturbs the balance of Book VI, into small print, and relegated it to the bottom of the page.

recitation with the *ideal* recitation which the reading has given us or will give us ; and the effect is often disastrous. It was Charles Lamb's private reading of *King Lear*, and all the endless reverberations of that mental voice, which made it impossible for him to endure seeing and hearing it on the stage. A modern work has thus to pass several tests of different kinds, whereas the early bards had to face but one. Even when Æschylus and Euripides published the tragedies that had been heard, they took a great risk, worse even than that taken by a writer of articles in the weekly press who collects them in a volume. Would the play that had taken the thronging audience with beauty capture the solitary student ? Sometimes, we know the play that had failed at the Dionysia succeeded in private ; sometimes the converse happened. Xenocles might defeat Euripides in the theatre ; but he has not done so in the study.

Taste, then, evolves not only as men themselves change, but as the media of communication vary ; and if ever some method be discovered by which thought may be conveyed directly from mind to mind, taste will assuredly change again. Suppose some future Shakespeare or Dante to be able to think, and by mere thinking make us think his thoughts, it is tolerably certain that many old works of genius will pass out of fashion, and will fail to hit the new taste then generated. The old immortals will die, and new immortals will arise to flourish their little season, knowing as little as their predecessors how much of their glory had been due to circumstances and accidents entirely outside themselves.

III

LITERARY TASTE IN GENERAL

It may seem unnecessary to remark that tasting, as applied to literature, is a mere metaphor. Yet it may well be remembered that metaphors are deceptive, and that half the mistakes in thinking are due to yielding to their deceptions. Nothing, for instance, has done more harm to the science of politics than the habit of carrying too far the analogy between the State and a person : and the errors due to the analogy between the education of children and the tending of plants have been almost equally numerous. The fact is that metaphors, like other good liars, tell the truth till they have induced us to trust them, and then come out with the lie.

In the case we are considering the figure tells, or implies, a good many of these preliminary truths. As in our physical aspect we do not live by tasting but by eating and digesting, so in our mental we do not live—in plain words we do not learn—by taste. The pleasure derived from eating may indeed *induce* us to eat and so keep up our strength ; and the pleasure derived from a book may induce us to read and so to learn. But it is not itself learning, and is at best—to use another deceptive metaphor—the handmaid to learning. And when we talk of literature as such, we are not thinking of the instruction it may give, but of

the more or less pleasant way in which it gives it. This is what Charles Lamb meant when he talked of books that were no books : a parcel of pages stitched together that gave him no enjoyment was to him not a piece of literature at all. And this was what I meant when I said above, taste, in itself, was not an affair of brains.

But, having told the truth so far, the metaphor proceeds, as so often, to deceive. The next feature to be pointed out is one in which the likeness fails, and in which the use of the word taste may, unless we are on our guard, lead us astray.

In physical taste, at least in its elementary stage, the pleasure or revulsion is felt directly and almost if not quite, instantaneously. We like or dislike the thing itself, without reference to anything else. We never say, 'I like this because it reminds me of that' ; we like it in itself. With literary taste, the case may often appear the same : but no one, as I have already pointed out, can carry his analysis far without perceiving that the sense of beauty or ugliness we derive from literary works is always, or almost always, a matter of association and suggestion. If we put aside the plain *satisfaction* which we feel when, by an orderly arrangement of sentences, or by the use of the appropriate words, the author has made reading easy to us, it would I think be no exaggeration to say that our pleasure in 'good' writing, as our annoyance with 'bad,' is *always* a matter of association. Where it may seem to be otherwise, this is because, by habit, the association is made so swiftly as to seem instantaneous. This is why books, passages of poetry or prose, even the complete works of an author, which once pleased or displeased us, are found later to act on us in the opposite way. New associations have gra-

ally and unconsciously arisen, and the same words now suggest different images. There is, in fact, no sound, word, or combination of words, which is beautiful in itself, or which cannot become ugly by association with something we dislike. Examples gross as earth will instruct us. We have only to consider the simplest of consonants to be convinced. It is well known, for one instance, that Milton disliked the hissing palatal *sh*, and substituted *s* for it whenever he could. The Semitic languages, on the other hand, indulge freely in it: and hence Milton, drawing so largely on Hebrew names, behaved like the Ephraimites at the ford, and was often hard put to it to avoid the objectionable sibilant. Tennyson went still further. He was delighted when he heard that Archbishop Trench had been acute enough to notice how dexterously he shunned the sound of *s*: Pope, on the other hand, most certainly did not shun it. These differences were plainly due to differences in the associations these consonants stirred in the minds of the different poets. And so with words. Some years ago, as Mr Spender tells us, the *Westminster Gazette* set a prize-competition for the most beautiful word in the English language. The word fixed upon was 'swallow.' 'Do you mean a bird or a gulp?' said Mr. Spender: and the prize was not given. But where is the difference in the *sound*? Is it not plain that among the things which go to making the so-called beauty of a word the strong association of its *meaning* is one of the most powerful? To turn to accent. An Irish brogue is often sufficient to induce an Englishman to empty his pockets: Bernard Shaw, a competent authority, has told us there is nothing in it. I knew a Scots boy whose accent could get round the sternest of his English

schoolmasters : but his Scottish mother had sent him to school in order that he might get rid of the horrible tone, and acquire the charming English one. Matthew Arnold imagined there was an absolute beauty in Greek proper names as compared with our English ones, and poured cultured scorn on our surname 'Wragge.' He did not pause to consider that familiarity had bred contempt. The English names came to him associated with the sordid surroundings which nauseated his Oxonian soul ; whereas the Attic names came to him linked with a thousand memories of pleasure derived from Greek poetry, and with the deceptive glamour of Greek myth. Time has washed away the squalor of the Athenian slum, and left the Parthenon to delude our historic sense. We have little doubt that, if the Greeks had come two thousand years after us, and studied our literature : we study theirs, some Matthew Arnold of Athens or Alexandria, mocked by the magic of Shakespeare or by the charm of the ruins of Westminster Abbey, would have fancied a beauty and a glamour in Dickens's 'Mr. Grewgious' or 'Mr. Snodgrass' which he sought in vain in the 'Socrates' or 'Themistocles' that he heard every day. This is not to deny that there is often an ugliness in the merely strange. The law of association moves in mysterious ways. We cannot arouse much enthusiasm at first for Tiglath-pileser or Hatshepsut : and our interest in Utnapishtim is usually no more than interest in the grotesque. But let a man be once 'bitten' with the splendour of the ancient monarchies, let him be carried away with the sense of immemorial age, and these names acquire beauty which is not at first to be perceived in them. On the other hand, all sorts of impulses, patriotism

family feeling, clannishness, mere perversity, may lead men to fancy a beauty in their own language which is quite imperceptible to the callous outsider. The Kalmucks, according to De Quincey, are quite convinced that their own tongue is the most exquisite in the world ; and the Germans love the gutturals which annoy some foreigners. A dialect charms its native speakers, as a Yorkshireman uses his broad patois in his home, refusing to talk standard English in surroundings that arouse tender associations, and reserves the affected and mincing style for business hours : or as a Hanoverian will stoutly maintain that his pronunciation of German is the only wear, while it annoys the Rhinelanders or Swabians. Yet it is the same sound—with different associations to different people. But we need not cross the North Sea to find proofs that when we talk of beauty in words we are really, consciously or subconsciously, having regard to something else. It is enough to look at recent baptismal registers. Thirty years ago, what middle-class mother called her daughter Elizabeth, Anne, or Jane? These were associated with the kitchen. Later, as the kitchen began to poach on the drawing-room, the aristocratic names were dropped, and the 'good old-fashioned' ones returned. They are, and must be, in themselves as beautiful, or as ugly, as ever : the suggestions they carry have altered. And so it is with the appellatives : it is certain that words now hateful, and hardly to be pronounced at all, were once absolutely harmless. Does the reader see any difference between *tishshagalnah* and *tishshachabnah*? Yet, if he were to pronounce the one in a Hebrew synagogue all the audience would hiss him from the lectern : if the other, he would cause no excitement.

One main element, then, in a 'good' book is that it contains a series of words and sentences which call up pleasing associations; and a writer who does this continuously is said to have a good style. But it is plain that the associations must vary from practically *nil* with one reader to almost infinity with another. To the beginner in Latin, Virgil's style is non-existent: his arrangement of words appears arbitrary and stupid: the words themselves have a meaning, to be found out from a dictionary, but nothing else: his rhythms, and his variations of rhythm, cannot be felt. So far, he can appeal to the reader merely through his story; and that unravels itself so slowly that he knows no more of it than a pedestrian learns of England in a day's walk. The 'taste' for Virgil of such a reader is not very delicate or discriminating.

But now let us imagine that he acquires a little more knowledge. He learns, let us say, to scan. He thus gains the power of perceiving that the lines run with a swing. His ideas are crude: he probably recites the lines with a sing-song like that with which a child recites a nursery-rhyme. But he has made *some* progress, however slight: he can admire the mere fact that without destroying the sense, Virgil has contrived to keep to one metre. Possibly this metre has English associations for him: he can compare it with that of *Evangeline* or the *Bothie*. His taste is growing.

Now take him half a dozen years later, when he can sense, to some extent, the use of words in a certain order, the elaboration of the sentences, the repetitions which never fail to add something, the dignity and stateliness of the diction. He may, further, learn that Virgil borrows, and yet always puts himself into his borrowings; that passages from Ennius or Lucretius

are always appropriate to their changed setting, and always new however old. He may be able to feel the rhythmical beauty of the *Georgics*, or the tender grace of many paragraphs of the *Æneid*. It is plain that all this growth of taste is due, in the main, to an enlarged acquaintance with the Latin language and literature, as well as with other languages and literatures. Nothing is as it was, to *him* : the words once dead are now alive with associations, some conscious, more subconscious ; the rhythms, once mechanical, perhaps even beaten out with the fingers, are now musical, and their subtlest variations are ' felt in the blood, and felt along the heart ' ; the phrases, once but accumulations of words, ' disturb him with the joy ' of innumerable suggestions ; until at last he tastes, with Newman, those ' pathetic half-lines, giving utterance, as the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness, yet hope of better things, which is the experience of her children in every time.' A perfect Latin—and Greek—scholar, if such a man could be found, would be the perfect appreciator of Virgil : and even to-day, with all the hindrances of two thousand years, some men come not far off the ideal.

Or, to take an example from our own literature, a student of Milton, who in many respects appears to resemble Virgil, may easily apply the test by his own memories. Let him recall his first reading of *Paradise Lost*, perhaps in early youth. He may remember how much in that poem passed by him quite unnoticed, how he was conscious but of a strange narrative, not always pleasing, and of a roll of majestic sound. He may even have been fretted by the blank verse, and may, like Johnson, have wished the poem had been in rhyme ; or, more probably, the long paragraphs, the

inversions and involutions of the style, may have given him some annoyance. Gradually, however, if he is one of those on whom Milton makes an insistent inscrutable demand, he sees the enormous power of the 'planetary' style, and the vast range of possibilities open to the poet who has discarded the 'unnecessary adjunct' of rhyme, and the 'jingling sound of like endings.' Or he may have been at first totally blind to the associations of the mere words, which in Milton, as is well known, are packed with varied suggestion, and are meant to call up every image that can be drawn from their ultimate derivations. How different is it all when he learns to weigh and analyse these words, and wring from them their full meaning: when, for instance, *idea* comes to him with the whole burden of the Platonic philosophy, and without the enfeebling associations of to-day! Or, again, he may have been deaf to the multitude of classical allusions or reminiscences sometimes hidden in the slightest turn of phrase. As these loom on him, one by one, what added beauty do they bring! To feel these things is but a fragment of the vast potentiality of enjoyment open to the diligent reader of Milton. To a man totally destitute of the capacity to feel them, *Paradise Lost*, though it has a strange power of stirring the dormant poetry even of the ignorant, must yet often appear weary, flat, and if not stale yet unprofitable. He will be in the painful position of seeing that something is aimed at that he cannot perceive: he will 'behold a great tumult, but wit not what it is.' Contrast such a man with the 'consummated scholar' of whom Mark Pattison speaks, whose 'last reward is the due appreciation of Milton.' To him the poem comes with an appeal derived from ten thousand associations,

slight, strong, verbal, stylistic, phraseological, rhythmical: and when once this mastery has been attained, the man has a 'possession for ever,' not merely in his knowledge of the poem itself, but in the trained taste which will thenceforward enable him, like the child of prophetic promise, to 'know the evil and to choose the good.' However many standards he is able to acquire later, he will now have at any rate one standard. Not the least of his acquisitions will be a new and almost unlimited store of noble associations, by which he will be able to judge other poems and assign to them their proper places. To take but one example out of hundreds, he will no longer be content with verse that merely scans. He will weigh in Milton's balances the blank verse of *Festus*, of the *Seasons*, of the *Night Thoughts*, and find it wanting: while, with a due sense of originality in imitation, he will weigh that of Tennyson, Keats, or Shelley, and note that it does not kick the beam.

It was a man like this that Milton had in mind when he prayed for an audience fit though few. And this once more leads us to the perception of the relativity of taste. No poet's repute is more firmly established than Milton's: it stands, amid all changes, 'like Teneriffe or Atlas, unremoved,' and perhaps the more securely because, like Teneriffe, Milton stands alone. He is not, like Shakespeare, the Everest among a thousand lesser peaks: he rises solitary from a plain. You cannot miss his grandeur. And yet it is clear that hardly two people can read him in the same way. He makes one appeal to the ignorant, another to the fairly well-read, another to the profoundly learned: one to the student of Homer, another to the Dante-enthusiast, another to the 'correct' Frenchman who is steeped in

Racine : yet another, may I add, to Mr. T. S. Eliot ? For even Mr. Eliot, amid all his depreciation of Milton, reveals that he is somehow conscious of the poet's greatness : and his very depreciation, so far as it goes but proves my point. To quote once more Coleridge's familiar saying, ' We receive from Nature but what we give her ' ; and in this respect Milton, like every other poet, resembles Nature. We receive from him not what we give exclusively, but nothing that is not tinged with what we give. We cannot bring to the reading of *Paradise Lost* ' an understanding equal or superior ' to the poet's : but unless we bring something like it, in whatever degree, we shall fail to gain from it. If from ignorance, prejudice, or obstinacy, we do not bring this element of our own, the poem will not speak to us. It is this union, or fusion, of the poet with the reader that provides the sphere in which taste works. No writer lives for himself alone ; his book is for reader and writer. Nay, in a very true sense it is written *by* the reader, who must collaborate with the writer if the book is to achieve any sort of real existence. Even if the writer finds no one else to read it, he has been two persons in producing it. He has made it and he has read it ; he has prepared the meal and he has tasted it.

No mistake is more far-reaching than that which conceives of a book as something merely written. Unless it is read it is a maimed thing, or rather nothing at all. It exists, if it exists, in that mysterious region of which the metaphysicians speak, where the object is without a subject to perceive it : it is an abstraction totally without interest to the ordinary human being. And, as there are millions of readers—at least for those books which live long, and for those books which have

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a short life but an ignoble one—every book is many books. It is a phenomenon seen by a million eyes, absorbed into a million consciousnesses. To talk of a *Buch an sich* is to talk of an impossibility. A book is the impression it makes on this reader, another reader, and yet another: all that, but nothing else. To the wrong reader *Paradise Lost* is but a performance: to the right one it stands among the greatest achievements of the mind; precisely as a symphony of Beethoven makes every sort of appeal, from the agony it gives to the tone-deaf, through all grades of annoyance and pleasure, to the trance-like ecstasy it affords to the man who, by nature and nurture, is worthy to hear it.

Every book, and every paragraph, that we read, supplies in its measure—sometimes insignificant, sometimes great—a standard for later books; and this reference to a standard, consciously realised or not, is what we mean by taste. A child may have read but one book; it appreciates the next by a comparison or contrast with the first. I do not mean that it measures it *solely* by this comparison; but this previous book is one, and often the chief, element in the child's experiences which are brought to bear in the appreciation of the book. As he reads more, his reading becomes a more and more important element, for this purpose, among his experiences. He gradually learns, feebly and inexactly, to isolate the pleasure he derives from books, and mark it off as a *literary* pleasure. This we call forming a *literary* taste. The process is astonishingly varied and complicated. It may work by contrast. Previous books, of apparently the same class, have been liked or detested; this one may repel him or attract him by a clear dissimilarity which appears

to him as a superiority or inferiority. Thus, to take a familiar example. He may read *Tom Brown's School-days*. This—a certain previous experience in *mere* reading being assumed—will be tasted according to the boy's own school-life: it will seem probable or improbable, good or bad, by comparison with that life. The descriptions of football and cricket will be appraised by his own knowledge of those games. He will think the book mawkish or manly according to the effect his own upbringing has had upon himself. Finally, perhaps without knowing he does so, he sums up the innumerable impressions and feelings he has had during the perusal, and appraises the book as a whole. 'It is,' he may say to himself or others, in his own vernacular, 'not such a rotten affair after all.' But what I would wish to emphasise is that this is a decisive experience for him. Its results cannot be lost, except by some great mental catastrophe, if entirely even then. His reading of his next book is, by the very fact that it is a next book, a vastly different thing from what it would have been had it been the first. He has now not merely his own life, but a *book*, as a mental sphere conditioning his reception of another book. Suppose that he continues his course of school-stories. Should he choose *Eric*, or *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's*, while of course his own school-life will still set its mark on his appreciation, he will inevitably feel the new book with a mind of which *Tom Brown* is now a part. He will contrast or compare the new book with his remembered feelings as to *Tom Brown*, and by means of new powers communicated by *Tom Brown*: and, with the majority of boys, it is to be hoped, the resultant impression will be that the later book is somewhat inferior. It is less true to life, less

satisfying to his nascent literary taste. It will be read against a background of something dimly perceived to be higher, and will in all probability be vigorously condemned in consequence. Had the books been read in another order, however, the effect must have been different, for the standard would have been different. A bout of *Eric* might well, to many boys, have made the sentimental parts of *Tom Brown* appear even crudely robust ; while, if the boy had learnt to distinguish between the honest and straightforward style on the one hand and the turgid and over-rhetorical on the other, the revolt against Farrar's flamboyance would be much stronger if he came to it after the simplicity of Hughes.

It is, of course, impossible to enumerate even a tithe of the influences which combine in the strange jumble of feelings that go to the tasting of a book. In early days we accept any or all of them without question. A boy likes or dislikes, in either case violently, but usually without asking why. It cannot well be, until a considerable number of books have engendered in a youth a more or less fixed taste, that all these influences will fail to sway him in disproportionate degrees, or that he can taste—I do not yet say ‘judge’—a book in any but a very crude fashion. Though, as I said above, he may have become able to discriminate *literary* emotions from others, he has not yet learnt to use this discriminating power with any regularity or precision. He is still prone to like or dislike a book because it does, or does not, give him an accurate picture of scenes or persons familiar to him in daily life. I have known boys who could not endure *Stalky and Co.* because the slang employed by Kipling's heroes is strange to them : and others, of the public-

school type, to whom Talbot Baines Reed's stories are annoying because the author has not caught the peculiar public-school tone. Our youth, in fact, cannot—and, to tell the truth, few of his seniors can—quite like an author whose opinions he detests. He cannot read 'objectively,' and distinguish between the manner of a writer and his matter, or keep irrelevant prejudices from intruding into what ought to be a closed compartment of his mind. As a sailor cannot endure a sea-story, however 'well' written, in which the author betrays ignorance of navigation, so with him. What seems impossible in his own experience will destroy all appreciation of stylistic merit. Or, as too often happens, he may associate certain books, and in consequence their authors, or perhaps even all books, with the idea of a school-task, or of an examination in which they were set. A thousand other influences may affect him, and distort his powers of appreciation, as a thousand may go to the development of his literary feelings. But in any case, so long as these irrelevancies *do* affect him, we say that his taste is as yet 'unformed.'

If we consider the enormous variety, alike in general experience of life, in mental acquirement, and in special literary capacity, which is to be observed in readers, variety in language, in nationality, in nurture, in heredity, in daily occupation, and in a thousand other points, we shall once again perceive how impossible it is for the same book, the 'Buch an sich' which we may assume for the moment to have a real existence to produce the same impression on them all. It would indeed be a miracle if it produced the same impression on any two, though those two were twins brought up in one house, and never separated for a day. And, as

the 'Buch an sich' has in fact no existence; as a book is—to repeat what can scarcely be too often repeated—the result of a chemical combination between author and reader, it is still more improbable that this combination can in any two cases be the same. There are in truth more *Iliads* than there are transcripts of the *Iliad*, more 'best-sellers' by far than there are copies sold. It would seem, then, as if there could be no satisfactory standard of taste: and in one sense this is unfortunately the fact.

Things, however, are not quite as bad as that: and what I have already said about standards may provide some comforting suggestions. As, in medicine, the doctor has to deal with human bodies, and minds, no two of which are exactly alike, and occasionally makes some appalling mistakes, yet is recognised to be a better judge of the human frame and its peculiarities than the layman, so in the world of literature. There are men who have read more books, or have read fewer books with more care and better comparing powers, than others. Their minds are enriched with more various associations, alike of words, of phrases, and of whole works, than are the minds of others. They can therefore come more closely into contact with the minds of the writers than the majority. We recognise, for example, that a man who is steeped in medieval lore is a better judge of Dante than we are ourselves, or that a man who knows Chaucer, his sources, and his contemporaries, is more likely to understand him than a mere beginner. If to this equipment he adds the power of being able to interpret his author clearly to us, to bring out easily and vigorously his strong and weak points, to draw our attention to characteristics we might otherwise have missed, then we are ready to

give him the same sort of confidence we give to a doctor. He is human : he sometimes makes horrible blunders, and, as with doctors, his colleagues are by no means always in agreement with him : but he is none the less, compared with ordinary men, an expert and an authority. He is in our common phrase a 'critic.' In a later chapter I shall attempt the difficult task of showing wherein criticism differs from the 'taste' about which I have so far been speaking.

IV

ON CHANGES OF TASTE IN GENERAL

A FRIEND of mine once asked me whether I did not think that a fashion in literary taste might be closely associated with fashions in other things. Might we not, he asked, be able, by a little exercise of imagination, to guess at the history of literature by looking at the history of costumes? The Elizabethans and Jacobeans, he said, wore stiff ruffs and wrote stiff paragraphs. The Victorians wore crinolines, and indulged in flowing periods. The beaver hat and the heavy stock of the Reform period were, he thought, remarkably parallel to the rather heavy language of the novels of the same time: and he went so far as to throw out the suggestion that short skirts and short sentences went together.

I did not quite agree with him. I asked him how he reconciled Addison's portentous wig with his light essays, or what likeness there was between the style of Cowper's John Gilpin and the nightcap so dear to all familiar with Cowper's illustrated works. Again, if short skirts go with short sentences, what about the present time, when—so we are told—short skirts are worn by day and long in the evening? Is a novel written in the morning more snappy than one written by the same lady at night? Or could we tell, by inspecting a poem, whether the man who wrote it was still in his plus-fours, or had donned the evening-

dress and dinner-jacket before sitting down to work at his *vers-libres* ?

Nevertheless, my friend's theory does call attention to the fact that literary taste, like so many other tastes, is to a very great extent the creature of mere fashion. It is ever varying, not merely among masses of men, but in the individual man. The wind of taste bloweth where it listeth : you can no more tell why it changes, or what will be its next manifestation, than you can say why the crinoline came in or why it went out. So variable is it in fact that, as the reader must have observed, I have not been able to keep myself from talking about its changes even when discussing it in the abstract. So marked a feature of literary taste is this tendency, that I defy anyone to describe it without alluding to its fickleness, however eager he may be to discover some permanent principle on which to base it. It may be that variety is not of the essence of the thing ; in any case it is what the old schoolmen called an inseparable accident of it. It is like liability to error, which does not form part of the definition of humanity, but without which no human being is known to exist. A taste appears, and often runs through the world like a prairie fire : the matter that has kindled it is too small to be detected, and when it ceases to blaze you cannot tell what has put it out.

But sometimes you need not wait for it to go out. You cross a room, and find the fire cold. Later generations do not agree with earlier ; but contemporaries differ equally. No examples are necessary ; but as a mere matter of interest we may glance at Tacitus's *Dialogue on Orators*. There we learn how Cicero thought Calvus, the 'salaputium disertum' of Catullus, bloodless and chilly, while Calvus called

Cicero loose and without sinew : to Cicero Brutus was bare and disjointed, to Brutus Cicero seemed 'fractum atque elumbem,' feeble and without backbone. 'If you ask me,' says Aper, the speaker, who lived a hundred years later than these famous orators, 'all these men were right': and he goes on to say why he prefers the men of his own time to the heroes of the past. It is mainly on that 'why' that the other interlocutors do not agree with Aper: Tacitus does not appear to agree with any of them; and modern students, while disagreeing with Tacitus, do not agree with any of his puppets. This is a type of what happens whenever two or three critics meet together—except that Tacitus's characters talk politely and kiss each other at parting. A change of fashion has rendered such tokens of urbanity impossible to-day: but we may endeavour here to discuss the question as amicably as modern manners permit.

In one sense, and that a not unimportant one, it would seem that if taste did not change, we should not have any. All taste, it is obvious, involves comparison, and comparison involves difference. If all notes in the scale were reduced to one, we should, apart from mere numerical distinctions, have no means of telling one from another, and music would, at best, become a mere Morse code or clog-dance. One note might precede, or follow, another, or be longer or shorter than another; and that would be all. Time itself, if not but a name for change, has to be measured by it. With taste, and things which we tell by taste, whether physical or mental, the case is the same, 'only more so': for we have nothing outside the 'palate' by which to judge them; whereas with other things we have sometimes the advantage of being able to use more senses

than one. Thus space, which in the first instance is certainly an affair of tactual sensation, is very early in our lives measured by sight : and even smell and hearing, which in many respects approximate to taste, may often be corrected by other senses.

I am speaking here, of course, about changes, or varieties, which we experience when we taste *different* things. Even when we do not realise that we are comparing tastes, we are in actual fact comparing the taste of the thing with the neutral taste of the palate itself ; and not seldom we compare one thing with another either as present or as remembered. When we taste sugar, we taste it as sweet compared with other foods. If all foods were as sweet as sugar, and all sugars equally sweet, we should have no recognisable feeling, and should be unable to mark off anything from anything else. Our only motive for eating—it might perhaps be to our advantage—would be to abate the pains of hunger. As things are, comparison is a necessary element in taste, though it is usually, to all intents and purposes, instinctive. When we pass to literary taste, the comparing impulse is much more easily detected. As we read a poem, and note that it has pleased or fretted us, a host of comparisons are inevitably made ; and, though most of these are subconscious, we are certain that they are there, and we can often trace their history. The versification may jar—that, we know, is because we have, by long practice, accustomed ourselves to a certain standard of smooth rhythm. The words may charm—this is because certain words, in certain collocations, recall past feelings of pleasure, or subtly avoid feelings of annoyance. The only difference between these mental tastes and the physical is that the latter, in the main,

are instinctive: they are born with us: while the former have been acquired. Even the pleasure derived from rhyme and lilt is probably not the gift of pure 'nature': there are tribes, apparently, that are without it. But be this so or not, these literary influences have been so thoroughly assimilated that, to all intents and purposes, they move us as spontaneously as if they were innate. Innate, indeed, they are held by some to be.

But—and here I pass to my main subject—it is impossible that these tastes, though aroused by the same things, can remain the same. A long process of eating sweetmeats, as is well known, produces first indifference, and then disgust. Similarly, a constant process is going on, of the reception and assimilation of new ideas, every one of which makes some change in the receiving mind—if indeed the mind is anything but this very succession of ideas. Repetition of impressions tends to produce, in many cases, satiety, and the desire for something new. The old wine ceases to please. In other cases it produces a dull, flat, unadventurous taste, which is inclined to reject anything not experienced before: but even here there is change, in the direction of greater stubbornness and unreceptiveness. This is very frequently to be observed in men, otherwise of great power, whose studies have been confined to a certain range: their tastes become hardened within that range, and they cannot welcome anything markedly foreign. The classical instance is, of course, that of Darwin, who, after long years of scientific work, found it impossible to recapture the delight which in his youth he had found in Shakespeare. But it is almost equally noticeable in men of more literary turn than Darwin. Few men have read

more, or more widely, than Macaulay : yet his reading had distinct limitations, and had gradually ossified his mind. As Trevelyan tells us, he scarcely read anything, except novels, written after 1840. Ruskin, Carlyle, were sealed to him. In Buckle he found little but some of the faults of Warburton ; and of the period between 1842 and 1850, one of the richest in the whole poetical history of England, he remarked how barren it was. He was one of the most modest of men, and yet, years after the appearance of his *Lays*, he set down in his journal that he was not aware of any better poetry that had been published since. Much reading of earlier poems—though those were assuredly among the very greatest ever written—had left him dulled to later harmonies. The change, in men of this kind, is shown by a growing disinclination to change. Whereas in youth one had been willing to test almost anything, now one finds the chief pleasure in retracing old paths.

But there is another way in which reading may produce change—change to a flat level of indiscriminating acceptance of anything whatever, good, bad, or indifferent. Sir William Hamilton was accused by John Stuart Mill of reading so many works of philosophy as to have lost the power of seeing whether the philosophers he studied agreed with him, with each other, or with themselves. True or not of Hamilton, it is certainly true of some people that they read so much of every kind as to welcome anything whatever with complete impartiality. This was, I believe, the case with Magliabecchi, who is said to have been the most voracious reader of all time. He was the shark of libraries, and devoured everything on paper and in print, till he did not know the difference between Ariosto and a poetaster. It was certainly the case with

Joshua Barnes, who, according to Bentley, loaded his mind till the *Iliad* seemed no better than his own *Polemo-middinia*. And it is the case with these ceaseless readers of novels, who as soon as one is finished begin another. A novel, to them, is a novel, yellow or brown, and it is nothing more. There has been here a change, slow but certain, from more or less of daintiness to an extreme of gluttony.

If, then, we find constant variation, gradual or sudden, slight or great, in an individual, so much so that we can never be sure he will like next month a book over which he is enthusiastic to-day, or will not be obstinately liking it still more vigorously, it is plain that we must expect change from generation to generation. We should expect mighty changes in Methuselah or the Wandering Jew as the centuries passed over his head ; but each generation is not only later than its predecessor ; it is made up of different people, who start from a different point, pass through different experiences, and view them with different eyes. A thousand causes, not literary, necessitate this advance or retrogression ; and a thousand literary causes add their weight. Long before Sir Bedivere is old, he finds himself nothing but a voice, among new men, strange faces, other minds. A war, a political or social upheaval, a French Revolution, or an era of repression, a new mechanical invention, and literature responds to it as face answers to face in a mirror. The men of Marathon could not be expected to approve of the drama that sprang up after Salamis : and the young men threw the ancient plays impatiently aside. The change, in fact, is often but the natural antagonism of age and youth, which, as was observed long before the Passionate Pilgrim set out on his progress, cannot

live together. Probably, ever since Jubal smote his lyre, the parents have disliked the frivolous fugues the children have pursued, and the children have rejected the stodgy stuff that suits the parents, and laughed at the 'rumores senum severiorum.' We know how the 'vetus poeta' strove, first by persuasion and then by malediction, to withdraw Terence from the writing of his 'thin and empty' plays, and how the youthful poet retorted on his elderly enemy. So it was in the beginning, so it certainly is now, and so, in all likelihood, it will be till the final conflagration destroys old and new together. Thus it is that we find literary reigns short, and the poetic dynasty constantly overturned by a revolution. It is rarely that an Amurath an Amurath succeeds : it is an Arician monarchy in which the ruler is ever being deposed by a pretender who is himself always liable to deposition. The king lives within the shadow, like the priest who slew the slayer and shall himself be slain.

No illustration of this truth is necessary. A score of illustrations, all probably different, will start up in the minds of a score of readers. But I cannot refrain from quoting here the words of one of the best poets that even Ireland has ever had. He is talking of the changes that may be expected in the next generation in his own country. 'No doubt that generation will formulate its own ideas. Quite possibly there will be a reaction to romanticism and Sinn Fein. Every generation reacts from the generation that has gone before, just as in Europe the Classical movement was followed by the Symbolist. Years ago, Yeats and O'Grady and Hyde and myself tried to produce the most mystical literature in Europe, and the reaction has been Joyce, O'Casey, O'Flaherty, and MacNamara,

who are among the most realistic of European writers.

‘The next generation will probably get tired of realism; but no one can say what it will turn to. Literature is not like geometry, which advances from point to point, and the next step in which can be more or less accurately predicted. But we *can* say, with great likelihood, that realism will *not* be followed by realism.’

These, as has perhaps been guessed, are the words of Æ, Mr. George Russell, who has seen in his life as many inexplicable changes, both political and poetical, as most men: and they are true and wise words, as might be expected of their author. Change, if not decay, in all around we see.

This is not to say that the new dynasty, however violent its methods of accession, and however brief its tenure, is less legitimate than any other. It rests on a plebiscite, and as long as it can retain the favour of its public its rule is lawful. There is no test of rightful kingship, in this region, save capacity to hold the allegiance of the ruled. It may appear, to after ages, that the Napoleon of the realms of rhyme gained his domination merely by sounding phrases, or that the Bourbon dynasty, though less showy, was more lasting: but the true judges, after all, are the contemporaries. Poetry that suits its time *must*, so far, be true poetry. That it does not suit a later time is no more against it than the fact that Marlborough never saw an aeroplane is against his true reputation as a general. Every man, whether warrior, statesman, or writer, must use the means available in his time and country for working upon the understanding and emotions of his fellows; and the fact that these means often go out of date is

no fault of his. 'Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth': and the master of the author is his public. It is common for Englishmen to wonder at the French worship of Racine. But Racine wrote for Frenchmen, and by their judgment he abides. With very short intervals he has carried their suffrages for three hundred years; long enough to prove that the mass of associations conveyed by his rhythms and phrases awakes a pleasurable response in a vast number of French minds. To millions, then, he is and must be, a great poet: for of great poetry there is no other definition than this, that it stirs deep thought and elevated feeling in multitudes of people. On the other hand, those in whom these feelings are not stirred have a perfect right to say that he is not a great poet—to *them*: although the confession may really be but a confession of their own limitations. For the most universal of poets can appeal only to those who have something in common with him: and such a thing as a poem absolute does not exist. It is a thing to be heard or read, and is a function of the sympathy between the author and his audience. Where there is no such sympathy, *there* the poetry vanishes; and it is a mere accident of language that we are compelled to say that, on a certain occasion, the *poetry*, as if there were such a thing apart from the hearers, failed to move those hearers. The hearers are as essential to the poetry as the author himself. This was what Milton meant when he prayed for a fit audience: he knew that to the unfit *Paradise Lost* itself would be a thing of no value; it would be the music of the spheres to a population grossly clothed in with a muddy vesture of decay.

To pass to a variation of taste due not to space but

to time. There are many who deny the title of poet to Pope ; to whom his monotonous and epigrammatic couplets are like much study to Ecclesiastes. To such, then, he is no poet. But he was assuredly a poet, and a supreme one, to the men of his own generation, and for fifty years after his death. Even the ' malice ' which, in his own day, ' denied his page its own celestial fire,' admired in its heart while it refused open admiration. He made, in fact, precisely the impression on his contemporaries which he wished to make, and it was to them a poetical impression. Within that world he sat unquestionably as chief, and like Job he received in the gate the homage of old and young. The time came when this homage was denied him : this was because the world had changed, the ears of the new age were deaf to him. He ceased, therefore, to be a poet. And yet a little effort on the part of his detractors, a zealous study of his times, of his language, of the end he aimed at, and a vigorous endeavour to cast aside later associations and to live into those of his time, would have changed their taste again, and made them appreciate him almost as fully as the men of 1740. Greatness, littleness, mediocrity, are but names for the impression a writer makes upon his readers, and will vary with those readers. Gulliver has but to leave Lilliput and visit Brobdingnag, and the proportions are reversed. Man, to use Voltaire's title for him, is Micromegas. Nothing is more certain than that man is the measure of himself and everything else, and yet nothing seems harder to keep steadily in mind.

When a change of taste thus occurs, through process of time, distance of place, mere satiety, or any other great or trivial cause, directly literary or

quite unliterary, we have to beware of that 'criticism' which, as we shall see later, always comes in to justify it, and tries to dignify mere excuses with the name of philosophical principles. The surest sign of inadequacy in criticism is that it shows itself parochial, and cannot recognise merit beyond certain narrow bounds. When we observe men not content with simply saying that they have ceased to like what pleased their fathers, but presenting us with a vast parade of philosophical and psychological reasons in order to prove that we *ought* to dislike it, then is the time to distrust those men. If the principles of criticism are of such far-reaching and binding character, it is a miracle that our fathers did not perceive them. They are not, like the principles of natural science, matters of gradual and asymptotic approach, involving constant small corrections of previous results. They demand but slight knowledge of human nature, and a very few examples of literary fame and the loss of it are enough to provide a basis for all the reasoning that is necessary. You need, in fact, to know little more than that mankind is *varium et mutabile semper* if you want to explain why the great writer of yesterday is the little one of to-day. Yet each successive generation, with a comical air of profundity, produces its apparatus of critical theory, which, like Kant's somewhat arrogant *Prolegomena to all Future Metaphysics*, is first to demolish all previous structures, and then to lay the foundations for an everlasting and indestructible erection. Unfortunately, this new Tower of Babel never rises very high: and it is soon obvious that every one of the builders is speaking a language unintelligible to his fellow. Ere long they leave off their toil; but another equally sanguine band is straightway ready to take their place.

Such criticism might as well be ignored from the first : it is an attempt to prove a foregone conclusion, and to demonstrate that what one man now likes all men should always like. Wesley said the world was his parish : these people want to make out that their parish is the world.

If the beauty of a work of art is an absolute entity, inherent in the work itself, and in no way dependent on the percipient, it is plain that no change of taste can make it more or less beautiful. What it was, it is, and what it is, it will be. But if so, it is strange that the passage of a few years, or the distance of a few miles, should mar this wonderful perfection, and blind people to a charm which was so visible to others. If, as Spenser says, 'all men adore perfect beauty,' what is the veil that so often hides it from their eyes? According to the same authority, who himself is building upon the authority of Plato, there is somewhere a wondrous Pattern, to whose mould all beautiful things have been fashioned,

That now so faire and seemely they appeare,
As nought may be amended anywhere :

and, as earthly things partake of it more or less, they are able to gain a vision of it. Unfortunately, even Spenser is unable to tell us with precision where this Pattern resides. It may be on earth laid up in secret store, in which case it must be hard to catch sight of it ; or it may be in heaven, that 'no man may it see' at all. This being so, men have to put up with what poor imitations they can find ; for a pattern that cannot be seen might as well not exist. The fact is that this theory, whether expounded by Plato or by Spenser, is merely poetry—and, for the sake of argument, I am

willing to admit that, as poetry, it is very 'beautiful': but I refuse to go further and to assert, with Keats's urn, that it is therefore truth. As soon as we try to reduce it to prose, we are involved in endless confusions and contradictions. Nay, even in the lovely Hymn in which Spenser proclaims the doctrine, we cannot read far without seeing that the poet contradicts himself, both verbally and substantially, with a *naïveté* which, to me at least, adds to the charm of his verses, but which utterly fails to convince my understanding.

An illustration may be drawn from a region not usually considered very poetical. Einstein, if I understand him aright, has shown that if a man, in a moving train, walks an exact yard in a second, that distance will not be an exact yard to a man measuring it from the relatively stationary embankment, whatever precautions he may take to secure accuracy. The 'absolute' yard may perhaps be 'laid up in secret store' in the heavens, but there is no way of getting at it. Now in studying a work of art, every human being is in a separate train; and the trains are moving not merely with different but with constantly varying velocities, in all sorts of curves, and in all directions. Every 'yard per second' will therefore be different. The arrogant critic thinks he is standing on the embankment. He is not; and if he were the platform also is a moving one. And *his* measured yard is but relative to himself.

Beauty, then, changes and must change, as the individual man and the race of men, move on their separate and erratic paths. It is, to repeat, but a function of the sympathy between the painting and a changing spectator, between the poem and the altering reader, between the sonata and the inconstant hearer. Unless

the artist can appeal to a set of associations in the spectator's mind, more or less similar to those which induced him to make the painting or the sculpture, it will be viewed with indifference or even with disgust ; in two words, it will be nothing or it will be ugly. Unless the words, the rhythm, the structure of a poem start a train of suggestions in the reader more or less similar to those in the poet's mind, it will be read with a similar indifference or disgust : it will be ugly, or it will be a thing of naught. The brazen serpent could cure when it made its miraculous call upon the trusting multitude : when it was to them a thing of brass it left them in their pain. As I have said, we can at times, by labour, put ourselves into something like the poet's frame of mind : we can gain some sympathy with him : and then, if there has been some force or energy in him, our minds will answer to his. We shall be able to say, ' That is beauty ' : but we must not be so modest as to deny our own share in the process. With contemporary authors, our labour will usually be less ; and with contemporaries whose experiences have been like our own there will be practically no labour at all ; our minds will unite with the author's instantaneously, and—if we pause to reflect—we say *at once* ' That is beauty.' But give the same work to another, whose experiences have been different, and see how feeble the effect !

Some words once, it is said, spoken by Mr. Sean O'Casey may be here in point. ' An artist,' he said, ' always knows what is his best work.' This is true, in the somewhat platitudinous sense that he knows what is best *for him*. He knows what suggestions he has intended to arouse, and can see, better than anyone else, how far he has succeeded in arousing them in his

own mind. But it is not true that he must always think the same work better than others, or even good at all. In the course of a few years he will have become different, and the old work may not suit the new man. It is probable that when Swift finished *Gulliver's Travels* he felt that here was his best work. In his later days his mind changed, and he went back to the *Tale of a Tub*. Still less can Mr. Sean O'Casey be sure that the work he now prefers will seem the best, that is *be* the best, to others. He is right, however, when he goes on, 'Of course, I want people to like my plays, that is, to comprehend them. No audience can get exactly the same vision as the artist, but an audience can get its own vision helped by the artist.' When we say, then, that a work of art is good, we mean, first, that the author's idea is satisfying, secondly, that to a greater or less degree he has realised it, and thirdly that, so far as we understand it, it satisfies *us*. But by no means whatever can we drain 'goodness' of its relativity: we shall *always* decide merit by reference to ourselves. And, as everybody else must do the same thing, to say a work is good in the abstract is simply to use words without meaning.

There are many people who imagine that it is a mark of superiority to be severe in the rejection of forms or styles that have gone out of fashion. It is certain that the younger generation, when it pours scorn on the works that pleased its fathers, imagines that in doing so it is showing how much better it is than the old. The exact contrary is the case. Inability to appreciate a style once regarded as great is simply a proof of ignorance and narrowness of mind. If we say we cannot endure Pope, Tennyson, or any other of the gods of the past, that simply means that we are

hopelessly limited in our outlook: that we cannot take in more than a very little at once. It is the stupid insular arrogance that says all foreigners are fools. It may be that we have not the opportunity of learning the foreign language or the means to go abroad. In that case the *ignorance* may be excusable, but the arrogance is not. It must always be remembered that Pope, having satisfied the Augustan age, *must* have been a great man, unless we are to be guilty of the inexpressible crime of bringing an indictment against a whole century: that Tennyson, having been the idol of the Victorians, *must* have been great, unless we are to claim that the age of Darwin, Huxley, Browning, Clerk Maxwell, and a thousand other names, was an age of imbeciles. That *we* do not like him shows that we do not understand the age in which he lived. It may be that we have not the time to put ourselves, by hard study, into the position to understand that age. So far, we are pardonable: but we are not pardonable if we make a boast of our incapacity. The first thing we have to recognise is that our fathers were *not* stupid, that when they admired they admired with reason. Nothing is more ridiculous than the swaggering vanity which goes about saying, 'Doubtless we are the people, and wisdom *was born* with us.'

If, amid all the uncertainties and vacillations of criticism, there be anything indubitable, it is this, that catholicity of taste is superior to fastidious narrowness, that the man who can find pleasure in the works of a dozen periods and many languages is so far of a higher rank than the man who has to confine himself to one. As I hope to show more fully in a later chapter, nothing is more certain amid uncertainty than that the inability to appreciate, in due fashion and measure, what others

appreciate—in fact, to enter sympathetically into the minds of our fellows—is a *disability*, something to be ashamed of rather than to be boasted about. A blind man is to be pitied : but if he begins to howl ‘I see,’ his sin remaineth.

The acquisition of this catholicity is, of course, no easy matter. We find it hard enough to understand our nearest neighbours : to understand, even partially, those far removed from us is a task of deliberate toil, long continued and intense. Fortunately, it brings its own reward. The enlargement of mind is in itself sufficient recompense ; but when it carries with it the power of appreciating some great work which before was dumb to us, the payment is doubled. The labour of acquiring Greek is great, but the mere labour strengthens the mind, and when it has succeeded so far that in some measure we can hear the ‘surge and thunder of the Odyssey,’ who would call it wasted ? Nor is our time misspent if it merely teaches us our ignorance, and makes us see that we can never hear that surge as it once was heard. To have learnt modesty is in itself an education.

There is a sense in which even the gradual *refinement* of taste is sometimes to be carefully watched and checked. If we find that books which are to us obviously crude and bad are yet popular, there is a danger, here also, of an arrogant superiority. The right attitude is not that of contempt, but that of humble inquiry into the causes of the sympathy between the ‘bad’ author and his public. It may be desirable to study whether a writer with this wide appeal can be altogether bad : whether he has not some quality of humanness which perhaps the more ‘high-brow’ author might not cultivate with advantage.

‘There is one person,’ said Talleyrand, ‘wiser than Napoleon ; c’est tout le monde ’:¹ and the great world may not be so stupid after all. In any case, the study of the bad author throws light upon the character of the public that likes him : and, if the proper study of mankind is man, one of the best ways of studying him is to study the books he reads.

It will be my endeavour, in later chapters, to illustrate these positions more or less in detail : but before starting on these chapters I should wish to remind the reader that men are never simple. It may be desirable to isolate their motives and likings, and to consider them separately, but in actual fact these motives and likings are inextricably entangled. Ricardo and his followers considered man as an exclusively money-seeking animal, which he never is ; and other philosophers considered him as a merely sentimental animal, which he never is. What an individual man would do, seeking money one hour and sentimentalising the next, remained undetermined. Similarly, I shall isolate certain tastes of man, and for the moment pretend that they dominate him. In real life they scarcely ever do dominate him : he is Habakkuk, *capable de tout*. But there are advantages in considering the tastes separately, provided always that we do not, like King Lear, ‘take the indisposed and sickly fit for the sound man,’ nor, on the other hand, imagine that even the ‘sound man’ is the whole of humanity. Man is never either wholly sound or wholly sick. The instant he is either, he dies.

¹ Canning remarked that the taste of the House of Commons was better than that of the most tasteful man in it : and Canning was neither the first nor the last to make the observation.

V

CRITICISM

IF Taste always involves a reference to something else, it may appear always to include a judgment: indeed such reference would seem to be the very definition of Judgment. The old philosophers used to say that an Object was 'presented' to the Subject, and that the Subject 'judged' it to be so-and-so: that is, compared it with previously presented objects, and concluded that it was either similar or different. If, for instance, an object was presented which we judged to be sufficiently like our concept of Man to be included in the category of Man, we decided that it was a man: if it differed, we decided that it was not a man. It might seem that when we like a verse or a poem because it raises certain pleasant associations, we are exercising a similar activity.

But when we look more closely we see that taste, pure and simple, is not thus active. It is passive: the pleasing or unpleasing associations are roused in us without any effort on our part: whereas the decision that an object is a man, however rapid it may now have become through habit, is none the less an *exertion* of our powers, precisely as a practised musician is exerting his fingers, though his skill may be such that he is quite unconscious of the slightest strain. But no one exerts himself, even unconsciously, to like or dislike sugar: the feeling simply *occurs*. And similarly, though you

like or dislike a verse or a sentence not in itself but because of its associations, these associations are not collected with any effort, however small: they arise spontaneously, or rather they usually do not *arise* at all: more often than not they never reach the surface of consciousness. Take, for instance, a line of Chaucer, which I imagine is as likely as any in the language to be generally called 'beautiful':

And she was fair, as is the rose in May.

It may be safely asserted that ninety-nine out of every hundred readers of that line simply *taste* its beauty. They do not pause to ask, 'That runs smoothly. Yet it consists of ten monosyllables, and ten monosyllables rarely run smoothly. How has Chaucer managed that?' or a score of other questions. Below the surface it is true, but not realised, lie a number of suggestions: those aroused by the poet's previous pictures of Emily, her spring-like youth, the freshness of the early year, the sunlit dew upon the rose on a summer morning. All these things lie beneath the surface of our minds. When we call them forth, when we begin to reflect on them, we have criticism, that is, more or less deliberate comparison and judgment. I said in an earlier chapter that taste, as such, had nothing to do with the intellect. But we may recall the pregnant words of Keats, 'Touch has a memory.' Still more reminiscent is touch when it advances to taste. And when that taste-memory is duly employed to compare and to judge, the intellect comes into play. Add this intellect to taste, and we have criticism.

True criticism will never lose sight of its parent and original. While constantly weighing and appraising, it will, if it is to have its perfect work, be tasting also.

Nothing is less satisfactory than an arid, mechanical, and merely measuring criticism. Reason alone is as feeble an instrument in literature as it is in life, or as a dull calculation of averages is in deciding the grace or skill of a cricketer. The aim of poetry is to give pleasure, and the temptation of a critic is to forget that he, too, is to get this pleasure. He often contents himself with the *enumeration* of faults or virtues, and tends to become a statistician.

This suggests that before advancing further it may be desirable to defecate the word of those evil associations which, in common talk, it carries with it. Criticism does not, or at least should not, mean fault-finding—which itself is an inaccurate word for fault-seeking. It may have to point out faults, as it may have to point out merits : but it does not pry for the faults. When Iago said, ‘I am nothing if not critical,’ he meant, I believe, to say, ‘I am naturally of a judging, discriminating turn : one not to be taken in by casual and superficial likenesses.’ He was, of course, speaking ironically ; and, as his real character was that of a cynical, Mephistophelean denier of good, we are apt to fancy that he was using the word in its present-day bad signification ; but we are mistaken in so thinking. He called himself a judge, not a fault-finder. I desire like him to use the word without any of these connotations ; but otherwise I desire to keep it as wide as possible. When Pater (at least in his title-page) avoided it, and used ‘appreciation’ instead, he was making the same attempt, and trying to deter his readers from thinking there would be anything carping in his ‘weighings of values.’ Something of the same motive, amid obvious differences, may have swayed Oscar Wilde when, somewhat fantastically, he talked

of his 'Intentions.' But Matthew Arnold's essays in *Criticism*—though I think there *was* some carping in them—were *intended* to be free from it: and the title was not in the least meant to indicate that the chief features in the book would be the detection of flaws. You will find much subtle analysis, but very little sleuth-like tracking of literary crimes, in Pater's studies of Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Charles Lamb: and you will find plenty—often more than plenty—of recognition of good, alongside of some depreciation, in Arnold's essays. My list of critics will include both Arnold and Pater.

Another word, also adopted to avoid the suspicion of fault-finding, is Interpretation. The critic, says Mr. P. P. Howe, is the literary middleman. To the Interpretation school he is rather the literary showman or advertiser. Mr. Wilson Knight, for example, in his recent book on *Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies*, speaks as follows: 'Criticism to me suggests a process of objectifying the work under consideration—to show in what respects it falls short of or surpasses other similar works: the dividing its good from its bad: and a formal judgment as to its lasting validity. Interpretation, on the contrary, tends to merge into the work it analyses; it attempts to understand its subject in the light of the subject's own nature, employing external reference, if at all, only as a preliminary to understanding: it avoids discussion of merits, and, since its existence depends entirely on an original acceptance of the validity of the poetic unit which it claims to translate into discursive reasoning, it can recognise no division of good from bad.' It may well seem that the interpreter needs interpretation. I will therefore turn these words into plain English. Inter-

pretation tries to *understand* the work : it assumes the work has some sense in it. If some knowledge of the author or of his sources is necessary, it tries to get that knowledge : after that, it troubles no more but endeavours to make the sense of the work clear. Whether here and there the author fails in putting his case, is of no importance.—Now I regard this ‘interpretation’ as the first duty of the critic : unlike Mr. Knight, I would include this interpretation in my definition of criticism : and I shall notice it later.

But I have already pretty clearly indicated that I desire to keep criticism, even in this wide sense, as distinctly as possible, marked off from taste : and I have shown how difficult it is to do so. To refer once more to Reynolds. In what is perhaps his most famous discourse, the Seventh, Reynolds declares that ‘we apply the term taste to that *act* of the mind by which we like or dislike anything.’ If he means here to stress the word *act*, I have shown already that I disagree with him ; and certainly, in the later pages of that discourse, he seems to assign to taste the same active powers which belong to Reason, to Genius, to Calculation, even to Philosophy herself : and he leaps casually from such phrases as ‘relishing’ works of art to ‘weighing’ and ‘balancing.’ I pointed out some time ago that the subtle mind of Newman seemed to me to make the same leaps : and we shall find, I think, that Burke and others make similar assumptions. I have no desire to haggle about words, which, as Lewis Carroll remarked, will, if well paid, consent to mean anything whatever. But I think that this confusion, though sanctioned by such distinguished names, is at times productive of mischief, and I shall try to avoid it, as

a rule, myself. Criticism comes in later to *justify* taste : but it is not itself taste. Some help in avoiding the confusion may, as so often, be gained from philology : for, though words do not always follow the path indicated by their derivations, yet, as with children, we can sometimes find out the way they were intended to go, and from which in their age they do better not to depart. A glance, then, at the history of the crucial terms shows that the distinction was indistinctly felt from the beginning. Taste, as we have seen, meant touch. The figure of speech involved in the word 'criticism' is quite other. Unless I am deceived, *krino*, the Greek word from which it is derived, originally meant to separate : it is ultimately the same as the Latin *cribro*, to sieve, and as our word *riddle* in the same sense : a relative of the German *rein* and of our *rinse*. In criticism, then, there is always a conscious or implied *Distinguo* : we sieve out the good earth and reject the stony, we mark off the bounds between one style and another. This is a mental strain : it implies effort, whereas taste—I speak here generally—arises spontaneously. As, when you touch you feel resistance, but only later judge that the resisting thing is wood or iron, so with taste. It is true that criticism may *affect* taste, as a knowledge of what you are eating may affect, or prejudice, the palate. But the two *are* two : and—if I may be allowed to use for the moment a dubious psychological term—they belong to different 'faculties.' None the less, criticism often precedes taste, and often follows it, in such close neighbourhood that we often do not know which is which. When Leontes drinks without seeing the spider, and likes the potion, that is undoubtedly taste : but when someone 'presents the abhorred ingredient to

his eye,' and he loathes what he had liked, is this taste or is it criticism?

When reflection and knowledge thus come in, it by no means follows that taste is lost, any more than a trained musician ceases to enjoy a sonata because he knows all about its form, and can recognise every chord the pianist is playing. It may well be, and fortunately often is, that the criticism reinforces the enjoyment, and makes it keener than before. And if the hearer's knowledge is so thorough that it is part and parcel of himself—that the mental picture of the music rises without effort—then the judgment comes so instantaneously as to blend with the taste, and to appear practically, if not logically, one with it. It is for this reason that Reynolds, Newman, and so many others, pass insensibly from one to the other: they had lived so long in theory that theory and practice were one in their minds. But, such is the weakness and instability of human nature that criticism, which is essentially an affair of reason, often follows the lead of taste, instead of guiding or correcting it. It is no rare thing, as we have seen and shall see, for a man to find reasons, not always unprejudiced, for what has been entirely unreasoned. As Macaulay said of Burke, he adopts his principles like a partisan, and defends them like a philosopher. If we are candid with ourselves, we shall, I think, confess that more than once or twice, we have liked one passage, or disliked another, in the casual way common to such feelings, have stuck to our choice from sheer obstinacy, and have defended it on *ex-post-facto* grounds. We have a dim suspicion that the taste may be a mere prejudice, but we will not own it, and we call on all our powers of sophistication to convince ourselves that we are

right after all. But usually, of course, it is the other man who is prejudiced : as is shown by the fact that he does not agree with *us*. His taste is obviously bad ; but as it is a matter of personality, and springs from millions of associations which cannot possibly be shared, we have to *argue*, to appeal to something which we fondly hope is possessed in common by ourselves and our opponent, and that is, reason. We search for reasons which we imagine may have influenced our own taste, and endeavour, by enumerating them, to rouse the same taste in the other person. If, for example, we find a man to whom a certain series of words, a certain metrical scheme, or the plot of a certain novel, which we dislike is pleasing, or vice versa, we cannot alter his taste by a direct frontal attack, but—until experience has shown us the futility of most such attempts—we hope to do so indirectly. We reason, we lay down general rules, we call in the weight of authority, we point out the monotony or irregularity of the lines ; we draw attention to the associations roused by them in our own minds, as if they were somehow in duty bound to rouse the same associations in others. It was, as the reader will remember, in this way that Matthew Arnold dealt with the metrical scheme of Frank Newman's Homer. The original, he said, among other things, roused in him noble suggestions ; Newman's version reminded him of vulgar ballads like Johnny Armstrong. He was proceeding on the assumption, a right one, that the merit or demerit of a style consists in its *suggestive* power ; but he did not sufficiently realise that until you can take complete charge of a man's life from babyhood to age, and even arrange for his ancestry to be correct, you cannot secure that he will receive the suggestions that

you think desirable. He was, however, right in this, that you may hope, by your own personality, to rouse the requisite feelings in your own fit audience, and to guide *their* taste in the 'right' direction. There are many to whom Arnold's criticism of Newman makes this strong appeal. Prepared by a long series of causes, by natural bent, by education, by previous sympathetic study of Arnold's mind, they are willing to yield themselves to his guidance, and even, in some cases, to welcome his views as a mere affair of authority. They have come to regard him as a sound critic, and what he says carries weight because it is his, and passes muster in their minds just as the view of a doctor, whose advice has proved sound in the past, gains our trust for the future. He did not convince Newman, for obvious reasons: Newman was no 'fit audience.' But to those who held, from experience, that Arnold had a larger number of true and high literary associations, and that these were relevant to the case in point, it would be natural to agree with him. Those, on the other hand—they were probably less numerous—who, on similar grounds trusted Newman, would so far tend to agree with *him*.

This example will help to show, in a rough and tentative manner, what constitutes a critic. He is a man accustomed to weighing and balancing the emotional effects that literature exerts upon himself. Every book we read produces an effect upon us all; but we are not critics until we have learnt to pause and consider these influences. We must, first, *classify* them. How does the emotion stirred by a play of Shakespeare differ from that stirred by a book of Milton? Both alike, in any competent mind, stir admiration; but the critic distinguishes the two kinds

of admiration. To do this, he must have a clear idea of the effects aimed at by the two authors: the one writes plays, the other epics. He must therefore have studied plays as a class, and epics as a class, until he has formed a clear generalisation as to the ends of both; and he will, on the one hand, watch how each 'answers the great idea,' and, on the other, refrain from expecting from either what it never pretended to give. This is one of the first duties of a critic; and this is why many authors give the critic a hint which may save him initial trouble. When Scott styles *Ivanhoe* a Romance, he is gently warning the critic not to judge it as an ordinary novel: when Mr. Arnold Bennett puts 'Fantasy' on his title-page, he marks the book clearly off from *Clayhanger* or *The Old Wives' Tale*: if Meredith speaks of one of his works as a 'comedy,' the critic, remembering Meredith's ideas as to what comedy is, knows what class of emotions he is expected to experience. That is, if he is a true critic. A recent well-known case shows how desirable these hints are. Mr. Bernard Shaw, not having defined the nature of *The Apple-cart*, had to put up with a criticism which, according to his own statement, entirely ignored the purpose of the play, and was as utterly beside the point as if *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had been treated like *Every Man in his Humour*. But the incident shows clearly enough what the duty of a critic, on this side, is: it is to inform us to what class the book belongs, and thus to guide us as to the right attitude in which we are to approach it. Not that the author is not sometimes to blame. It is to-day—whether it always was so is another question—a defect in the *Merchant of Venice* that what we rightly expect to be a comedy should turn out to run perilously near to tragedy:

and a similar flaw mars the perfection of *Richard Feverel*. If such defects occur in a book, it is the critic's function to point them out, and if he points them out before we see the play or read the book, so much the better.

The uninstructed reader clearly requires such information. How often, for instance, do we hear men complain of 'improbabilities' in stories which make no profession to be 'probable'! A careless assumption that they were reading an ordinary novel has misled them. 'This couldn't happen,' they say repeatedly. Not till the critic tells them in the *genre* which the author has chosen 'improbability' is by no means ruled out, does the annoyance cease. The critic first of all informs them, either in his own words or in those which Aristotle quoted from Agathon, that it is probable many things should happen contrary to probability; and then points out that this likelihood of the unlikely should be borne specially in mind while they are reading this particular book. The author has tacitly required of them that 'willing suspension of disbelief' which Coleridge claimed for the *Ancient Mariner*; and, says the critic, if we are to enjoy the book we must humour the author. Anyone who seriously expects from *Tristram Shandy* a regular and continuous narrative will be fretted, and deservedly so. The aim of Sterne is to tickle the reader by constantly pretending to give him such a narrative, and constantly disappointing him. A reader worthy of the author will enter into the jest.

For there are works which aim at their effects by *deliberately* disappointing an expectation we have reasonably held as to their character. A score of other examples could be given. *Don Juan* will serve for one

among many. This constantly pretends to be poetry. Its mere verse-form demands, at first sight, that it should be so judged : and every now and then there are passages which, if not poetry, are nothing. Yet we are continually brought back to prose. Pegasus has hardly touched the clouds when he suddenly begins to crawl. The *Isles of Greece* may not be a perfect poem, but it has many of the elements of true poetry, and Byron certainly meant us to take it seriously. But in the very next lines he throws aside all the romance, with a gesture of contempt :

Thus sang, or would, or could, or should, have sung
The modern Greek, in tolerable verse.

So, in the midst of the 'wild farewells' of the shipwreck, we are suddenly soused in sarcastic comedy : and there is never, in all *Don Juan*, a touch of pathos but is succeeded by, or crossed with, a dash of cynicism : and scarcely a verse of good satisfying sound that does not close with a Hudibrastic rhyme. This frets many readers, and is one reason, apart from the general tone of the poem, why few women can endure it. The same effect, amid differences, is produced when Bernard Shaw ironically calls the *Doctor's Dilemma* a tragedy, and the hearer or reader discovers gradually that it is a tragedy in a peculiar sense. Here again many of Shaw's audience are annoyed by what they regard as a deception : and here again it is the function of the 'critic' to enlighten them. In order to gain an effect by contrast and surprise, Byron and Shaw have taken advantage of the ordinary man's limited powers of classification, of his tendency to separate books too simply into sheep and goats ; in a word, to believe what he is told. A critic, then, must classify his classifications, and sub-

divide his divisions. Unless we are ready to accept the author's point of view, and sympathise to some extent with his intention, we shall unavoidably and deservedly fail to gain from his work the kind of pleasure which, rightly viewed, it is capable of giving. Revulsion may, under the spell of a magic criticism of this kind, give way to enjoyment, and we may see in *Don Juan* a masterpiece of modern epic, in the *Doctor's Dilemma* a satire of a high order.

But classification, even when thus sub-classified, is only one part of the functions of a critic. As may be seen from the case of Arnold and Newman referred to above, he must, if he is worthy of the name, be alive himself, and endeavour to make us alive, to a whole series of associations, *in detail*, which the author wishes to arouse. In order that our mind may be in the duly receptive condition, he prepares us, by relevant instruction, not merely for recognising the author's *general* aim, but for viewing aright the means he has chosen to accomplish it. Thus, if he is criticising Gray's *Elegy*, he dwells on the choice of a metre, and points out its appropriateness—whether that appropriateness is really 'natural' or whether it has come by long habit is an interesting question, but here beside the point. He draws attention to Gray's theory of poetry, to his love of veiled quotations, to his rhythmical suggestiveness, to any other characteristic of Gray's mind which may throw light on the poem. It may be that we have read the *Elegy* before: if the critic does not make us see much that we have not seen already, he is not a good critic, or at least he is no better than ourselves. If we have not read it before, it is for him to prepare us to read it more intelligently, and with a fuller intellectual emotion, than we should

have done without his help. In a word, he is to add so largely to our mental equipment that we *taste* the work more keenly and adequately than we otherwise could do.

It is this, among other things, that makes Sainte Beuve¹ so great a critic. In dealing with his authors, he gives us just the amount and kind of information which enable us to understand their environment and point of view ; and then proceeds to guide us in studying their works in the light of the knowledge he has thus imparted. I have in fact such men—alas ! too few—as Sainte Beuve before my mind as I draw up my tentative list of the qualities of a critic.

Let me pause here for a moment to recall once more the analogy with which I began these chapters. Dr. Johnson knew all kinds of meals, from those provided by the tripe-shop to the banquets of Mrs. Thrale and the collations of Beauclerk. He had known what it was to go without food altogether for two days, and what it was to gorge himself like a Red Indian. And this is what he said : ‘ I, Madam, who live at a variety of tables, am a much better judge of cookery than any person who has a very tolerable cook, but lives much at home ; for his palate is adapted to the taste of his cook ; whereas, Madam, in trying by a wider range, I can more exquisitely judge.’ Whether Johnson was right in his opinion of his gastronomic acumen may be doubted ; but there can be little hesitation in

¹ If I may be allowed to mention the name of a living critic, I should like to add here that of Professor Oliver Elton. In his *Modern Studies*, for example, he gives precisely that *explanatory* criticism of Henry James’s *Wings of a Dove* which seems to me almost ideal. A reader of James who prepares himself for his task by first mastering his article, will have doubled his chance of enjoying the novel, and will have been saved a great deal of preliminary trouble.

accepting this view if it be applied to literary judgments. The critic must be a man of wide and very varied experience in reading—almost, if not quite, as wide as that of Johnson in eating. Otherwise he will not have sufficient materials in which to base a judgment. His must be no ‘inductio per enumerationem simplicem.’ He must be thoroughly acquainted with the great authors in several languages, or he will have no standard at all. But he must also have read many inferior authors, or he will put his candidate too low. As an examiner must know the whole range of his subject, or he cannot examine, but must also know the average abilities of men of twenty-two, or his standard will be absurdly high, so with the examiner of a book.

Next, he must not only have read, but must have reflected on his reading, and accustomed himself to analyse the impressions the reading has made on his own mind. In fact, he must be a self-critic, as well as a critic of books, and must be more severe with himself than with them. When he finds himself liking or disliking a book, he must consider whether this or that feeling may not be due to certain features of his own character, and whether these features are accidental or general. Like an astronomer, he will try to correct his personal equation, and detach his own preferences as far as possible from his judgments. It should be his aim to give a fair criticism of something that he may personally dislike. This implies *sympathy*.

Allied with this is a capacity which, of late years, has been more visible, and more strongly insisted on, than before—a psychological gift, both natural and trained : a power to discover, to some extent, the mind of the author behind the book. For the critic realises that the book is part of the man who wrote it, and that,

as it throws light on the man, so, when you attain some idea of the man, you understand the book better. This is the secret of the attempts that have so often been made to discover the *real* Shakespeare, the *real* Shelley, the *real* Byron. As an illustration, I need do no more than refer to certain recent works on Milton, both French and English. The writers of these books, by a close chronological study of Milton's works, prose, poetry, Latin, Italian, English, endeavour to reach an idea of the character of the man, and the changes that it underwent as years and circumstances set their mark on it. Thus equipped, they have come back to the poems, and have not only understood them better themselves, but have made *us* understand them better. They are aided, of course, by the fact that we know a good deal, apart from the poems, about Milton. But those who have read Andrew Bradley's essay on 'Shakespeare the Man' will see that even in the case of the poet who does not 'abide our question,' much may be learned: and I am convinced that the merit of Bradley's criticism of *Lear* and *Macbeth* is largely due to this attempt, incompletely successful as it necessarily was, to get at the mind of their author.

And the complete critic must also have the teaching power. He must not only have the trained taste, and the psychological gift, but he must have the communicating capacity as well. We do not call a man a critic who can merely criticise in silence: he must be able to give words to his ideas. It may be true—I will consider this in a moment—that critics are men who have failed as writers; but at any rate they must know how to write. In this respect literary criticism differs from criticism in all other arts; it is a branch, often a humble branch, of the art it criticises: and

sometimes, as in the case of Taine, Sainte Beuve, De Quincey, or Hazlitt, it is not humble, but very lofty. Pope said of the critic Longinus that he was himself the great sublime he drew. We cannot expect all critics to win such praise ; but if who drives fat oxen should himself be fat, who criticises authors must be something of an author himself. In striving to guide our taste, he must not provide a horrid example of tastelessness.

Another very desirable gift of the critic—though some good critics manage to do without it—is the philosophical mind—the mind, to put it crudely and briefly, which is accustomed to distinguish between appearance and reality, and knows from experience how terribly difficult the task of drawing that distinction is. It is largely this which makes Andrew Bradley such a good critic : and is this which makes De Quincey, in my opinion, as great a critic—when he turns his attention that way—as any in our language. We notice, as we read him, the constant ‘Distinguo’ of which I spoke just now : he is never content to assume that things which seem the same are anything but similar. As he has also an unsurpassed command of language to mark these distinctions, he is scarcely to be left out of any list of great critics. Something of the same training is to be seen in Lessing, perfectly simple as is the language he chooses to express his thoughts. And it is the absence of this gift which explains Macaulay’s weakness on this side of his comprehensive mind—a weakness which, with his usual modesty and self-knowledge, he confessed without reserve. He had taste, but not the critical power. He writes to Napier—‘Hazlitt used to say of himself, I am nothing if not critical. The case with me is directly the reverse. I have a strong and acute enjoy-

ment of works of the imagination ; but I have never habituated myself to dissect them. Perhaps I enjoy them the more keenly for that very reason. Such books as Lessing's *Laocoon*, such passages as the criticism on Hamlet in *Wilhelm Meister*, fill me with wonder and despair. I have never written a page of criticism on poetry, or the fine arts, which I would not burn if I had the power.'

This is true ; and it is allied with the fact that Macaulay could not read Kant, and read Plato not for his philosophy but for the style and setting of his dialogues. Consider his treatment of Robert Montgomery. Macaulay *felt* the *Omnipresence of the Deity* to be bad ; but he could prove it only by pointing out little slips of grammar and unimportant plagiarisms from better poets. There would have been something very different if De Quincey had handled the poem.

If the saying that a critic is a man who has failed in original work was in the first instance uttered in scorn, it may, I think, be taken quite seriously. No one can criticise fairly who does not know the difficulties of the art ; and he cannot really know them unless he has himself made the attempt. The man who did not know whether he could play the violin or not, because he had never tried, would be a very bad critic of Kreisler or Elman. I have often watched the watchers at a billiard-match, when the hundreds are reeled off so easily that the ignorant do not cheer. It looks so simple that the ordinary man thinks he could do it himself. But the man who can make fifty—*he* praises, and praises unstintedly. It is the same with literature, especially with poetry. I would have every critic of poetry a man who has failed as a poet, and *knows* he has failed. Let me give an instance from my own

experience. I have written one or two novels. They have never been published—I never even sent them up to a publisher. But I learnt much from them as to the difficulties of a novelist's art—difficulties often so triumphantly surmounted. Particularly have I noticed the difficulty of the padding—that part of the novel which at first sight seems superfluous, but which is really so necessary for giving the book due balance and proportion. I found this terribly hard to do. And ever since then I have been far more merciful even to some of the worst novelists I know, who have yet contrived, with apparent ease, to pad out their plots neatly and harmoniously. I would then have, as critics of novels, those who have themselves failed as novelists. But they must also be aware of their failure : and this is why good novel-critics are so few.

But a critic must not have failed too completely : he must not be a total incompetent. And this brings me to the one indispensable qualification of the true critic, which I have left to the last because it includes all the rest. Though he may be a poor executant, though he may be incapable of giving due expression to the thoughts which burn within him, he must have a share, and a large share, of the creative imagination which is the mark of the writer whom he undertakes to criticise. He must, in no inconsiderable measure, see what the poet sees and hear what he hears. If, through a defect in his vision or audition, he cannot enter into his author's world, he will obviously be unable to judge fairly the way in which the author has presented it. It is true that the author's own intensity of feeling may render *him* a bad judge *because* of its very intensity. He may be like a good mathematician, who leaps intuitively to conclusions, and is unable to

see that his explanations are obscure to the duller perceptions of his hearers. Thus the comparative dullness of the critic's senses may actually help him more calmly to judge the work—it leaves more of his mind at leisure for the exercise of judgment—but unless he has *some* imagination, some spark of the Promethean fire, he will fail utterly. This is why Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and De Quincey are such good critics : they are all imaginative writers. And this is why Shelley, Arnold, and Coleridge, in their tranquil moments of recollection, when their highest powers are in abeyance but yet alive, are such good critics also.

The perfect critic, then, was never born, and never will be born. 'Enough,' said Rasselas to Imlac, 'you have convinced me that no man will ever be a poet.' 'Enough,' the reader will say : 'you have convinced us that it is as difficult to judge a book as to make one, and more especially so as one has to make one book while judging another.' The poet soars to heaven ; the critic only climbs a short pole ; but the pole is well greased. Nevertheless the critic, even the imperfect one, has his utility : and all those who have benefited by criticism will admit it. He corrects our tastes, he justifies them, he even in some cases gives birth to them where, in the strict sense, they have hardly existed before.

But to revert. No one can be truly said to taste a literary pleasure, or to feel a literary distaste, unless he does so all but instantaneously. A laborious study, even with critical help, of the beauties or defects of a work, ending perhaps in a wearied appreciation of what is in it, may sometimes be necessary, but is not the joy and crown of intellectual emotion. That we attain only when the criticism has become to all intents

and purposes intuitive. What is worse than a pun whose point is toilsomely unearthed, explained, and analysed? We have, in the early stages of our Greek, or possibly in the later also, to work out the puns of Aristophanes: this does not tend to the due enjoyment of the *Clouds* or the *Wasps*. Such flashes must be seen at once like lightning in the collied night; the two ideas must combine with the speed of Oliver and Celia: they must be like the fight of two rams or Cæsar's thrasonical brag, and there must be no 'asking the reason.' Similarly, in a different sphere, of a higher order than that of a 'paronomasia or play po' words.' We cannot savour a verse of Gray, or of any other poet, until the measure of our intellectual equipment is sufficient, and our command of it ready. The words must convey their meaning, but they must also carry their associations, before the mind has time to say 'Behold.' We must need no dictionary to interpret them, no turning over leaves to verify them. That addition which the poet makes must attach itself, without conscious effort on our part, to the store we already possess: or, to put the same thing from the other side, our mind, prepared by a long process of 'criticism,' must instantly and naturally leap to the new ideas presented by the poet. If we have to count feet on the fingers, we cannot appreciate a variation in scansion introduced by the poet to convey some idea. If we have difficulty with ordinary language, we cannot appreciate an inversion or a subtle *avoidance* of the ordinary such as is so marked a feature in Tennyson or Virgil. A good critic prepares us for all this, and for more.

It is pretty plain, then, that the secret of true enjoyment is that the reader should himself be a critic:

in fact, all that I have said so far should be read with the recognition that the two are one, or ought to be. Little benefit will be gained from the reading of any book, however 'good' it may be, unless the reader brings 'criticism' to bear upon it. The author is one human being, using sounds, words, phrases, paragraphs, each with a purpose determined by a set of associations in his own mind, and those associations have been built up by gradual, conscious and unconscious, accumulation, during the whole of his life down to the very moment he had put the last sentence on paper. It is obviously impossible for anyone else, even for the author's twin-brother, to appreciate all these: the book, like the one in the Apocalypse, is sealed with seven seals. But it is possible, by study and thought, to open two or three of the seven, and to obtain some insight into the meaning. Nor is this study to begin with the book itself, with the author, or with his age. To this reading must be brought all the accumulations of our former reading, and of our external experience, gathered through our own lives. At times this study will lead, by one set of associations, to the discarding of others. Thus, for instance, if we choose Chaucer for our study, we must acquaint ourselves with his language and manner until we are at peace with them; until they have entirely lost their initial quaintness and air of antiquity, and we read him as naturally as Tennyson: till we have rid ourselves, for the purpose of studying him, of all modern associations. Within the Chaucerian world, we must be Chaucer's London contemporaries. It is a hard saying, but only those who have done this are competent critics of Chaucer; and the mere *taste* of others is worthless in comparison. Yet here, as so often, we

have to qualify—there are so many universal virtues in Chaucer, appealing to all humanity, that it is safe to say the merest beginner must feel them. He will feel them, however, more acutely the more he regulates his taste by criticism. I cannot deny myself or my readers the pleasure of quoting in illustration a passage from Professor Trevelyan's *Clio a Muse*. 'One day, as I was walking along the side of Great Gable, thinking of history and forgetting the mountains which I trod, I chanced to look up and see the top of a long green ridge outline in the blue horizon. For half a minute I stood in thoughtless enjoyment of this new range, noting upon it forms of beauty and qualities of romance, until suddenly I remembered that I was looking at the top of Helvellyn. Instantly, as by magic, its shape seemed to change under my eyes, and the qualities with which I had endowed the unknown mountain to fade away, because I now knew what its hidden base and its averted side were like, what names and memories clung around it.' This is an allegory of what happens when criticism—that is knowledge and thought—begin to play on passages or books hitherto known only to untutored taste. Some loss there may be, but the gain far more than compensates: the passage or the poem comes to us, like the mountain when recognised as what it is, linked with a hundred perceived memories, a thousand things forgotten, and the combined force of a million varied experiences. Or, to burden the reader with yet another analogy. The unhistorical man walks over a field, and sees a mound here, a hill yonder, a patch of grass, a clump of trees, a winding stream. The historian stops, 'for his tread is on an empire's dust'; upon his mind surge visions of tramping infantry, of charging cavalry, of triumph

and disaster, of desperate valour and pusillanimous retreat. He all but sees wounds, and death, 'rider and horse, friend, foe, in one red burial blent.' To the one the field is but a field ; to the other it is Blenheim or Malplaquet. This is the difference between the man who reads but words, and the man to whom the words are winged messengers, bringing news from far countries and from distant ages.

To this second man, and to him only, 'criticism,' in the sense in which I use the word, comes so instantaneously that it is scarcely to be distinguished from that intuitive feeling which is taste. He will often be hard put to it himself to discriminate the elements of his enjoyment ; and in common speech we call such a man a man of taste without troubling further. But to the true critic there comes that later stage, in which he reflects upon his enjoyment, and to the best of his ability analyses the causes of it, tracing those qualities in the writer which have met with such a response in himself, and marking where the author's success has been more or less conspicuous. If he is of an introspective bent, he turns his eye also inward, and notes what there is in his own mind which thus responds. The complete critic is he who satisfactorily performs both these tasks. It does not necessarily follow that he will impose his opinions on others, or succeed in arousing in them the same emotions as he has himself experienced. He will recognise that after all his emotions are personal, and that every book, and every passage in every book, *must* appeal differently to different people. Nevertheless his experience is of value to others. It is a guide and an example. This, we say, is what can be, and has been, felt by a man of taste and judgment : and if we put ourselves through

the same discipline we may feel something of the same exalted kind. And, on a lower plane, the *explanations* of his author which he gives, put us in a position to understand, and understanding is a degree to feeling. Similarly, if the man of taste uncompromisingly *rejects* something that we are tempted to admire, that rejection may induce us to start a 'criticism' of our own, and it is by no means impossible that the criticism may, with windlasses and indirect assays of bias, so work our taste that in time we too reject it as instantaneously as he. Our enjoyment may be recognised as contrary to reason, and there are times, fortunately for humanity, when, as with Cæsar, reason sways more than the affections. Every time, again, that we prove our mentor right, will increase the likelihood that we shall trust his judgment on the next occasion : and it may even be that we shall need to be on our guard lest we follow him too slavishly.

If things were as they ought to be in the literary world, taste would be oftener ruled by criticism than criticism by taste. That it is not so is due to the weakness of human nature, which prefers prejudice to reason, and fancy to truth. But it likes to *seem* reasonable, and therefore disguises its prejudices under a mask of argument. From a mere love of the old, we try to demonstrate that the old is intrinsically preferable to the new ; or from a mere turn for novelty we prove that the new fashion not only is, but ought to be, like the fool's motley, the only wear. Thus every change in taste is followed by a mass of 'criticism,' proving that this last manifestation is the very final Avatar of the poetic Vishnu. Yet it is as certain that there will be new fashions in the future as that there have been in the past fashions that once were new,

each of which was in its time hailed as the ultimate revelation.

Taste being thus variable, and 'criticism,' so called, thus following it as its slave, the only sound method for one who desires to free himself as far as possible from the bonds of time and place is to consider not so much taste itself as tastes, and not so much criticism in itself as types of criticism. But the *sententiae* being almost as many as the *homines*, it will be obviously impossible for me to give the minutest fragment of this history, or to venture more than a few plausible conjectures as to the causes which have influenced the thousand vagaries of which the history is full. Every vagary has innumerable causes, most of them so subtle as to elude the most microscopic search. As to the future I can foretell but one thing. I spoke of criticism as a slave. My own position will be that of the slave in the Roman triumph, whispering in the ear of the haughty conqueror that he is mortal after all, and that the same mob-voice which now exalts him may shortly curse him. Otherwise I can no more foresee the future than I can foresee next year's weather. I cannot even, like a meteorologist, give a plausible guess as to what will come next: and, the majority of mankind being inarticulate, I cannot even tell what is the prevailing taste at the present moment. There are many people who read 'best-sellers,' detesting them all the while, the reason being that one must read what others read. It would be an error to assume that, because they ask for such books at the libraries, that kind of thing is what they like. Nor are reviews—even when they agree—a safe guide as to the opinions of the presumably less cultured world at large. If my readers have watched, as I have more than once

watched with some interest, an author—who probably knows a good deal about his own book—reading a critique upon it, they must have perceived very clearly that there are usually at least two widely-differing views as to the merits of the work : and, if the work succeeds so far as to sell a single copy, there is certainly a third view. Yet author, reviewer, and reader are in this case contemporaries, and have at least one bond in common : what endless varieties must we not find as we pass from generation to generation !

A man of wide reading and great mental power once did venture a prophecy as to the future of style and taste. The telegraph, he said, would in his opinion, produce a staccato and truncated style, with no articles, scarcely any adjectives, pronouns conspicuous by their absence, and participles taking the place of whole sentences. There were, I think, signs that such a consummation was not by any means impossible. The prediction has been falsified, not by the precautions of writers, but by the prevalence of other mechanical inventions. The telephone and the wireless have largely counteracted the influence of the telegraph ; and it may be that *they* will have their own influence. Or it may be that other inventions will supersede them in their turn. That whatever does so supersede them will have *some* literary effect, however, I do not think at all unlikely. In any case, changes *will* occur, to whatever cause they may be due ; and as such changes in our own style come, they will inevitably modify our judgment of the style of our predecessors. All things are eternally moving, and nothing, least of all thought, continues in one stay.

The poet Gray, in his sanguine youth, conceived the idea of writing a Latin poem *De Principiis Cogitandi*,

a title which, for my present purpose, I may paraphrase
'How men come to think as they do think.' It was an
ambitious scheme, no less than to discover

Unde Animus scire incipiat ; quibus inchoet orsa
Principiis seriem rerum, tenuemque catenam
Mnemosyne ; Ratio unde rudi sub pectore tardum
Augeat imperium.

He never finished even the first book, and though, after
two or three hundred lines, he boldly leapt to the
fourth, even so he did not manage to put together
an approximately rounded whole. I am essaying a
hardly less difficult task, and one in which it is not
unlikely I shall have to make jumps as huge as Gray's.
Lacunae will certainly be detected : nor will this
confession ward off the inevitable censure. But I
shall endeavour to point out some common varieties of
taste, and to indicate some of their causes. For the
rest, I borrow the language of Homer when he came to
cataloguing the ships that went to Troy : a list which,
as is well known, has given all epic poets, if not their
readers, a taste for catalogues :

To count them all demands a thousand tongues,
A throat of brass, and adamantine lungs :
Daughters of Jove, assist ; inspired by you,
The mighty labour dauntless I pursue.

VI

THE RISE OF CONSCIOUS ART

I HAVE said that criticism affects taste : and affects it alike in the author and in the reader. When a writer begins to know what he is doing—when he criticises his own work—he can no longer write as he used to write. And when the reader, or rather the hearer, knows what the author is trying to do, he can no longer be influenced by him in the old fashion. Many have held that the result is unfortunate. Macaulay, it is well known, believed that poetry declines as criticism advances : and there is much to be said for his view. It is indubitable, at any rate, that the habit of constant criticism does occasionally spoil enjoyment to some extent : and it is probable that in certain cases extreme fastidiousness, due to this habit, has even prevented some men, who might have been good writers, from writing at all. Some, again, have been deterred from writing through fear of the criticism of others. But the almost universal result, when writing *has* been practised, has been the rise of what is called rhetoric. I shall try in the following chapter to say a little on this subject.

It is of course not till long after works of art have been composed that men begin to analyse them. Poetry, in particular, which would seem to be almost as natural to man as error itself, arises and advances perhaps through many centuries, more or less uncon-

sciously. Thousands of 'scops' and 'skalds' make verses, introduce novelties, and even devise improvements, being guided in part by their own untutored inclinations or talents, and in part by observation of the effect of their verses on the hearers. A 'school' thus arises, but there is hardly any direct teaching, no particular curriculum, and pupils who are little more than mere imitators: its doctrine is inchoate and informal, and heresy is detected simply by failure to please. The hearers like or dislike they know not why, and the reciters, though more keen-sighted, certainly cannot formulate the laws according to which they succeed or fail. At times, we may imagine, some great genius arises, who, receiving from his predecessors a tolerably fixed vocabulary, and a tolerably well-defined form, produces a poem which is recognised to be far beyond what has been hitherto achieved: but even he, like the Syrian archer, though he has hit the mark, has drawn his bow at a venture, 'in his simplicity.' He is an artist, but his art has been that which Shelley ascribes to the skylark—unpremeditated. Rarely, even in far more introspective ages, do we find in one man, mingled in equal proportions, the powers of a critic and of a poet: and high as the powers of this bard must have been, we may be sure that the Plato of his day, if such there were, would put down his sublimest flights to a divine madness. Nay, some of the most deliberate and sophisticated writers, in civilised times, have often gained their effects without purposed or conscious effort, and, like other sinners, have been surprised at what they have done. No great poet was ever more of a critic than Goethe: but it is certain that many of Goethe's lyrics were written with the uncritical side of

his mind ; he tells us with truth that he piped like the birds. It is well known also that so careful an artist as Tennyson piped or sang in linnet-fashion ; and we are told that often, reading criticisms on his works which pointed out subtle alliterations or delicate avoidances of the banal, he recognised that he had done this or escaped the other, but declared that, ~~till~~ the critic informed him, he had been quite unaware of what he was doing. Much more must this have been the case with poets like Homer, the authors of the *Edda*, or the creators of *Beowulf* and the *Seafarer*. They saw *how* their hearers were moved, but the *why* was hidden from them. They lived in the ages of 'tactile' taste, before criticism had arisen. I do not suppose, for instance, that Homer had the slightest conception of his own preference for the *oratio recta* to the *obliqua*. So far as we know, this was not seen till the days of Plato. The poets, like the Spartans, did what was right ; the hearers, like the Athenians, saw that it was right when it was done.

Now as soon as criticism really set in, its influence, both conscious and unconscious, upon writers of prose and poetry, as well as upon hearers and readers, began to make itself felt ; and it soon became strong and overmastering. It can, I think, be traced in 'Homer' himself. It is hard, for instance, to believe that the highly rhetorical speeches of Achilles in the Ninth Book of the *Iliad*—speeches that might have come out of Livy or Tacitus—are the product of pure undiluted inspiration. They seem rather to be born of discussions in some Ionian 'Mermaid Tavern,' between a Chian Jonson and a Milesian Shakespeare : they are reminiscent of arguments, rejoinders, sur-rejoinders : and to me they appear to provide a far stronger proof

